The Petrovitch Trilogy

Саймон Морден

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Annotation

Welcome to the Metrozone—post-apocalyptic London of the future. While the rest of Britain has devolved to anarchy, the M25 cordon protects a decaying city filled with homeless refugees, street gangs, exiled yakuza, crooked cops and mad cults. And something else; something new and dangerous. Enter Samuil Petrovitch: a Russian émigré with a smart mouth, a dodgy heart and a dodgier past. He's brilliant, friendless, cocky and—armed only with a genius-level intellect, prototype cyberware and a prodigious vocabulary of Russian swear words—might just be most unlikely champion a city has ever had. Welcome to the future. Mind the gap. This omnibus edition contains EQUATIONS OF LIFE, THEORIES OF FLIGHT and DEGREES OF FREEDOM

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Simon Morden

THE PETROVITCH TRILOGY

Book One: ***Equations of Life***

Book Two: ***Theories of Flight***

Book Three: ***Degrees of Freedom***

Book One
Equations of Life

1

Petrovitch woke up. The room was in the filtered yellow half-light of rain-washed window and thin curtain. He lay perfectly still, listening to the sounds of the city.

For a moment, all he could hear was the all-pervading hum of machines: those that made power, those that used it, pushing, pulling, winding, spinning, sucking, blowing, filtering, pumping, heating and cooling.

In the next moment, he did the city-dweller's trick of blanking that whole frequency out. In the gap it left, he could discern individual sources of noise: traffic on the street fluxing in phase with the cycle of red-amber-green, the rhythmic metallic grinding of a worn windmill bearing on the roof, helicopter blades cutting the gray dawn air. A door slamming, voices rising—a man's low bellow and a woman's shriek, going at it hard. Leaking in through the steel walls, the babel chatter of a hundred different channels all turned up too high.

Another morning in the London Metrozone, and Petrovitch had survived to see it: *God, I love this place.*

Closer, in the same room as him, was another sound, one that carried meaning and promise. He blinked his pale eyes, flicking his unfocused gaze to search his world, searching…

There. His hand snaked out, his fingers closed around thin wire, and he turned his head slightly to allow the approaching glasses to fit over his ears. There was a thumbprint dead center on his right lens. He looked around it as he sat up.

It was two steps from his bed to the chair where he'd thrown his clothes the night before. It was May, and it wasn't cold, so he sat down naked, moving his belt buckle from under one ass cheek. He looked at the screen glued to the wall.

His reflection stared back, high-cheeked, white-skinned, pale-haired. Like an angel, or maybe a ghost: he could count the faint shadows cast by his ribs.

Back on the screen, an icon was flashing. Two telephone numbers had appeared in a self-opening box: one was his, albeit temporarily, to be discarded after a single use. In front of him on the desk were two fine black gloves and a small red switch. He slipped the gloves on, and pressed the switch.

"Yeah?" he said into the air.

A woman's voice, breathless from effort. "I'm looking for Petrovitch."

His index finger was poised to cut the connection. "You are

who?"

"Triple A couriers. I've got a package for an S. Petrovitch." She was panting less now, and her cut-glass accent started to reassert itself. "I'm at the drop-off: the café on the corner of South Side and Rookery Road. The proprietor says he doesn't know you."

"Yeah, and Wong's a *pizdobol,*" he said. His finger drifted from the cut-off switch and dragged through the air, pulling a window open to display all his current transactions. "Give me the order number."

"Fine," sighed the courier woman. He could hear traffic noise over her headset, and the sound of clattering plates in the background. He would never have described Wong's as a café, and resolved to tell him later. They'd both laugh. She read off a number, and it matched one of his purchases. It was here at last.

"I'll be with you in five," he said, and cut off her protests about another job to go to with a slap of the red switch.

He peeled off the gloves. He pulled on yesterday's clothes and scraped his fingers through his hair, scratching his scalp vigorously. He stepped into his boots and grabbed his own battered courier bag.

Urban camouflage. Just another immigrant, not worth shaking down. He pushed his glasses back up his nose and palmed the door open. When it closed behind him, it locked repeatedly, automatically.

The corridor echoed with noise, with voices, music, footsteps. Above all, the soft moan of poverty. People were everywhere, their shoulders against his, their feet under his, their faces—wet-mouthed, hollow-eyed, filthy skinned—close to his.

The floor, the walls, the ceiling were made from bare sheet metal that boomed. Doors punctured the way to the stairs, which had been dropped into deliberately-left voids and welded into place. There was a lift, which sometimes even worked, but he wasn't stupid. The stairs were safer because he was fitter than the addicts who'd try to roll him.

Fitness was relative, of course, but it was enough.

He clanked his way down to the ground floor, five stories away, ten landings, squeezing past the stair dwellers and avoiding spatters of noxious waste. At no point did he look up in case he caught someone's eye.

It wasn't safe, calling a post-Armageddon container home, but neither was living in a smart, surveillance-rich neighborhood with no visible means of support—something that was going to attract police attention, which wasn't what he wanted at all. As it stood, he was just another immigrant with a clean record renting an identikit two-by-four domik module in the middle of Clapham Common. He'd never given anyone an excuse to notice him, had no intention of ever doing so.

Street level. Cracked pavements dark with drying rain, humidity

high, the heat already uncomfortable. An endless stream of traffic that ran like a ribbon throughout the city, always moving with a stop-start, never seeming to arrive. There was elbow-room here, and he could stride out to the pedestrian crossing. The lights changed as he approached, and the cars parted as if for Moses. The crowd of bowed-head, hunch-shouldered people shuffled drably across the tarmac to the other side and, in the middle, a shock of white-blond hair.

Wong's was on the corner. Wong himself was kicking some plastic furniture out onto the pavement to add an air of unwarranted sophistication to his shop. The windows were streaming condensation inside, and stale, steamy air blew out the door.

"Hey, Petrovitch. She your girlfriend? You keep her waiting like that, she leave you."

"She's a courier, you *perdoon stary*. Where is she?"

Wong looked at the opaque glass front, and pointed through it. "There," the shopkeeper said, "right there. Eyes of love never blind."

"I'll have a coffee, thanks." Petrovitch pushed a chair out of his path.

"I should charge you double. You use my shop as office!"

Petrovitch put his hands on Wong's shoulders and leaned down. "If I didn't come here, your life would be less interesting. And you wouldn't want that."

Wong wagged his finger but stood aside, and Petrovitch went in.

The woman was easy to spot. Woman: girl almost, all adolescent gawkiness and nerves, playing with her ponytail, twisting and untwisting it in red spirals around her index finger.

She saw him moving toward her, and stopped fiddling, sat up, tried to look professional. All she managed was younger.

"Petrovitch?"

"Yeah," he said, dropping into the seat opposite her. "Do you have ID?"

"Do you?"

They opened their bags simultaneously. She brought out a thumb scanner, he produced a cash card. They went through the ritual of confirming their identities, checking the price of the item, debiting the money from the card. Then she laid a padded package on the table, and waited for the security tag to unlock.

Somewhere during this, a cup of coffee appeared at Petrovitch's side. He took a sharp, scalding sip.

"So what is it?" the courier asked, nodding at the package.

"It's kind of your job to deliver it, my job to pay for it." He dragged the packet toward him. "I don't have to tell you what's in it."

"You're an arrogant little fuck, aren't you?" Her cheeks flushed.

Petrovitch took another sip of coffee, then centered his cup on his

saucer. “It has been mentioned once or twice before.” He looked up again, and pushed his glasses up to see her better. “I have trust issues, so I don’t tend to do the people-stuff very well.”

“It wouldn’t hurt you to try.” The security tag popped open, and she pushed her chair back with a scrape.

“Yeah, but it’s not like I’m going to ever see you again, is it?” said Petrovitch.

“If you’d played your cards right, you might well have done. Sure, you’re good-looking, but right now I wouldn’t piss on you if you were on fire.” She picked up her courier bag with studied determination and strode to the door.

Petrovitch watched her go: she bent over, lean and lithe in her one-piece skating gear, to extrude the wheels from her shoes. The other people in the shop fell silent as the door slammed shut, just to increase his discomfort.

Wong leaned over the counter. “You bad man, Petrovitch. One day you need friend, and where you be? Up shit creek with no paddle.”

“I’ve always got you, Wong.” He put his hand to his face and scrubbed at his chin. He could try and catch up to her, apologize for being… what? Himself? He was half out of his seat, then let himself fall back with a bang. He stopped being the center of attention, and he drank more coffee.

The package in its mesh pocket called to him. He reached over and tore it open. As the disabled security tag clattered to the tabletop, Wong took the courier’s place opposite him.

“I don’t need relationship advice, yeah?”

Wong rubbed at a sticky patch with a damp cloth. “This not about girl, that girl, any girl. You not like people, fine. But you smart, Petrovitch. You smartest guy I know. Maybe you smart enough to fake liking, yes? Else.”

“Else what?” Petrovitch’s gaze slipped from Wong to the device in his hand, a slim, brushed steel case, heavy with promise.

“Else one day, pow.” Wong mimed a gun against his temple, and his finger jerked with imaginary recoil. “Fortune cookie says you do great things. If you live.”

“Yeah, that’s me. Destined for greatness.” Petrovitch snorted and caressed the surface of the case, leaving misty fingerprints behind. “How long have you lived here, Wong?”

“Metrozone born and bred,” said Wong. “I remember when Clapham Common was green, like park.”

“Then why the *chyort* can’t you speak better English?”

Wong leaned forward over the table, and beckoned Petrovitch to do the same. Their noses were almost touching.

“Because, old chap,” whispered Wong faultlessly, “we hide behind our masks, all of us, every day. All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players. I play my part of eccentric Chinese shopkeeper; everyone knows what to expect from me, and they don’t ask for any more. What about you, Petrovitch? What part are you playing?” He leaned back, and Petrovitch shut his goldfish-gaping mouth.

A man and a woman came in and, on seeing every table full, started to back out again.

Wong sprung to his feet. “Hey, wait. Table here.” He kicked Petrovitch’s chair-leg hard enough to cause them both to wince. “Coffee? Coffee hot and strong today.” He bustled behind the counter, leaving Petrovitch to wearily slide his device back into its delivery pouch and then into his shoulder bag.

His watch told him it was time to go. He stood, finished the last of his drink in three hot gulps, and made for the door.

“Hey,” called Wong. “You no pay.”

Petrovitch pulled out his cash card and held it up.

“You pay next time, Petrovitch.” He shrugged and almost smiled. The lines around his eyes crinkled.

“Yeah, whatever.” He put the card back in his bag. It had only a few euros on it now, anyway. “Thanks, Wong.”

Back out onto the street and the roar of noise. The leaden sky squeezed out a drizzle and speckled the lenses in Petrovitch’s glasses so that he started to see the world like a fly would.

He’d take the tube. It’d be hot, dirty, smelly, crowded: at least it would be dry. He turned his collar up and started down the road toward Clapham South.

The shock of the new had barely reached the Underground. The tiled walls were twentieth-century curdled cream and bottle green, the tunnels they lined unchanged since they’d been hollowed out two centuries earlier, the fans that ineffectually stirred the air on the platforms were ancient with age.

There was the security screen, though: the long arched passage of shiny white plastic, manned by armed paycops and monitored by gray-covered watchers.

Petrovitch’s travelcard talked to the turnstile as he waited in line to pass. It flashed a green light, clicked and he pushed through. Then came the screen which saw everything, saw through everything, measured it and resolved it into three dimensions, running the images it gained against a database of offensive weapons and banned technology.

After the enforced single file, it was abruptly back to being

shoulder to shoulder. Down the escalator, groaning and creaking, getting hotter and more airless as it descended. Closer to the center of the Earth.

He popped like a cork onto the northbound platform, and glanced up to the display barely visible over the heads of the other passengers. A full quarter of the elements were faulty, making the scrolling writing appear either coded or mystical. But he'd had practice. There was a train in three minutes.

Whether or not there was room for anyone to get on was a different matter, but that possibility was one of the few advantages in living out along the far reaches of the line. He knew of people he worked with who walked away from the center of the city in order to travel back.

It became impossible even to move. He waited more or less patiently, and kept a tight hold of his bag.

To his left, a tall man, air bottle strapped to his Savile Row suit and soft mask misting with each breath. To his right, a Japanese woman, patriotically displaying Hello Kitty and the Rising Sun, hollow-eyed with loss.

The train, rattling and howling, preceded by a blast of foulness almost tangible, hurtled out from the tunnel mouth. If there hadn't been barriers along the edge of the platform, the track would have been choked with mangled corpses. As it was, there was a collective strain, an audible tightening of muscle and sinew.

The carriages squealed to a stop, accompanied by the inevitable multi-language announcements: the train was heading for the central zones and out again to the distant, unassailable riches of High Barnet, and please—mind the gap.

The doors hissed open, and no one got out. Those on the platform eyed the empty seats and the hang-straps greedily. Then the electromagnetic locks on the gates loosened their grip. They banged back under the pressure of so many bodies, and people ran on, claiming their prizes as they could.

And when the carriages were full, the last few squeezed on, pulled aboard by sympathetic arms until they were crammed in like pressed meat.

The chimes sounded, the speakers rustled with static before running through a litany of "doors closing" phrases: English, French, Russian, Urdu, Japanese, Kikuyu, Mandarin, Spanish. The engine spun, the wheels turned, the train jerked and swayed.

Inside, Petrovitch, face pressed uncomfortably against a glass partition, ribs tight against someone's back, took shallow sips of breath and wondered again why he'd chosen the Metrozone above other, less crowded and more distant cities. He wondered why it still

had to be like this, seven thirty-five in the morning, two decades after Armageddon.

2

He was disgorged at Leicester Square, where he spent a minute hauling air that was neither clean nor cold into his lungs. It tasted of electricity and sweat: its saving grace was that it was abundant.

He had to walk now, through the city streets, moving in time with the lights and the crowds, stealing the occasional glance up at the spires and slabs of mutely reflective glass that rose above and blotted out the sky, a sky that was itself crowded with private helicopters flitting from rooftop to rooftop without ever touching the ground.

He knew the route well, no need for HatNav or gawking like a tourist at the holographic signposts. The route that still—and he marveled at the inefficiency of it—still followed the medieval roads and possessed names that no longer had any meaning save to denote an address.

So Leicester Square was square, but there was no Leicester: Shakespeare brooded on his grimy plinth, and the trees were all dead. Coventry Street remembered a city destroyed and rebuilt, then abandoned. Then through Piccadilly, with its love-lorn statue sealed in a dust-spattered plexiglas dome.

Onward. Thousands of people, all of them having to be somewhere, moving in dense streams, sometimes spilling out onto the roads and into the gutters. Couriers running and gliding down the lines that separated the traffic, millimeters from disaster.

Green Park. No longer green, no longer a park, the domik sprawl thrown up on it in the first spasm of Armageddon long gone. Towers grew there now, brilliant high buildings that reflected the gray sky all the way to their zeniths. At their feet, marble and granite blocks wet with fountains. Workers filing in to the lobbies, suited, smart, plugged in to the day's to-do list and already voicing memos, compiling reports, buying, selling.

A woman was coming the other way, out of one of the towers and against the flow of bodies. Her boldness caught his eye. She crossed the plaza, repelling people with an invisible field composed of fear and deference. In the time it took Petrovitch to shuffle another twenty meters, she'd strode fifty, her silks and perfume trailing in her wake.

He thought that, surely, there had to be someone with her. From the backward stares of those she passed, he wasn't alone in that thought. The woman—the girl—no, he couldn't decide which—should have had a retinue with her, glasses, earpieces, bulges under their jackets, the works. There was no one like her, but there was no one with her.

They were on a collision course. She was walking like she meant

it, expecting a path to open up before her, until they were no more than a meter apart. She looked up from under her asymmetric black fringe, and saw the seething mass of humanity passing before her.

She hesitated, breaking step, as if she'd never seen such a sight before. Petrovitch tried to slow down, found that it wasn't possible. He was carried on, and she looked through him as he passed in front of her. He had the memory of her slanting eyes glazed with indecision.

Then, abruptly, stupidly, he was moving backward. For a moment, he couldn't understand why, because crowds like the one he was in had their own momentum: they went, and you went with them.

A slab of chest pushed him aside as if he were no more than a swinging door. An arm reached out, and a hand tightened around the woman's shoulder, engulfing it in thick, pink fingers.

The man who owned the chest and the hand lifted her off her feet and started for the curb, wading through the crowd like it was thigh-deep water. And somehow, Petrovitch was caught up in the bow wave. He struggled this way and that and always found himself inexorably propelled toward a waiting car, its rear door open and its interior dark.

He knew what this was. He knew intimately. He knew because he'd seen this from the other side.

She was being kidnapped. She wore the mask of mute incomprehension, the one that would transform into blind rage at any moment.

He waited, and waited, and her reaction still didn't come.

They were at the car, and there were figures inside: two in the front, another in the rear, and they were staring at him, wondering who the hell this kid was, either too inept or too stupid to get out of the way.

The steroid-pumped man wanted him gone: Petrovitch was blocking his path. He raised his free hand to swat at him, a blow that would send him flying and leave him insensible and bleeding.

Petrovitch ducked instinctively, and the hand brushed the top of his head. As he looked up, he caught sight of the one vulnerable point amidst all the muscle. Still, he should have run, stepped back, crouched down. It wasn't his fight.

But he couldn't help but ball a fist, point a knuckle, and drive it as hard as he could at the man's exposed Adam's apple.

The woman landed next to him, her hands steadying herself against the filth-covered pavement.

He had one more chance. He could turn his back, make good his escape, disappear into the crowd. She could work her own salvation out from here.

Petrovitch reached out a hand, and hers slapped into it, palm

against gritty palm.

They were off, not back toward the glittering towers of Green Park. That way was blocked by too many people and the rising man gagging and clutching at his throat. He dragged her out into the road, round the back of the car, back down the street against the flow of traffic—because that car would never be able to turn around. He pulled her behind him like a streamer, his own legs skipping like hers to turn their bodies sideways to avoid the wing-mirrors that rushed at their midriffs. Horns blared, collision warnings squealed, drivers beat on their windows and mouthed obscenities.

Behind them, the lights changed. The traffic stiffened to a halt, and Petrovitch vaulted over a bonnet to the faded white lines that marked the center of the road. The vehicles coming the other way were like a wall of glass, reflecting their fear off every smooth surface.

He stopped for the first time since… since he'd gotten involved in someone else's madness, and wondered what the *chyort* he thought he was doing. He looked down his arm at the woman still attached to the other end, trying—like he was—to make herself as thin as possible.

Two men from the car were moving purposefully down the line of stopped traffic. Not running, but striding in that way that meant nothing but trouble. The lights changed and the one lane that was still free to proceed jerked into life. The men in dark suits stumbled and shouted, and Petrovitch saw his chance: the cars in front were slowing. He ran to match their speed, then weaved between bumpers until he made the other pavement.

She was still there. She wasn't going to let go.

Neither were the men. One, fed up with barking his shins and negotiating his vast muscles through the narrowest of gaps, pulled a flat-black automatic out and sighted down his arm. A red dot flickered across Petrovitch's chest like a fly trying to land, and a shot banged out, amplified by the facades of the buildings.

A man, a black man with a phone clipped to his ear and in the middle of a conversation, spun violently round and vanished backward into the crowd.

Petrovitch blinked once, tightened his grip and fled. He was aware of the sounds around him: there were shouts, cries, and screams, varying in pitch and intensity, and there was the methodical crack of a pistol. Every time he heard it, he expected to feel bright pain, and every time it was someone close by who spasmed and sank to the ground. Not him, not yet.

It was impossible to judge how far ahead he was. The closeness of the structures, the intensity of the crowded pavement, the noise that was washing back and forth: all he knew was that he was ahead, a meter or ten or fifty, enough that whoever was trying to kill him

couldn't target him long enough to make sure.

And he was sure they were trying to kill him. They wouldn't risk this, risk everything, shooting random strangers in a central Metrozone street, if whoever's hand he held wasn't worth keeping alive. They could have killed her half a dozen times on the way from the Green Park building to the curb. They hadn't, and yet they kept on firing in an attempt to make him let go.

He was tempted. Even as he saw a side-street, less dense with traffic, actual visible corroded tarmac on the road, he thought about jinking left, loosening his grip, vanishing into the nearest alley and lying low until it was all over.

They'd grab her around the waist, lift her up to deny her the ground, maybe inject something through her pale-cast skin to knock the fight or flight from her, bundle her away, and it wouldn't be his problem anymore.

He turned left anyway, aiming for the center markings on the road, but he kept hold of her. He didn't leave her behind.

Now there was space for them to run freely, side by side. He had the chance to steal a glance at her, to check that she hadn't been hurt by a stray bullet, and he caught her doing the same for him. Neither of them had a hole torn in their clothing, nor a spreading dark stain.

Petrovitch flashed her a grin of pure nervous energy. She looked at him as if he was mad.

There hadn't been the sound of a gunshot for ten whole seconds. Two in quick succession shattered a windscreen and burned past his ear so close he could feel its passage. They were still coming. Obviously. Crowd density was dropping fast—the word of an incident was out, and those plugged into news feeds and navigation 'ware were steering a course around them. Good in that Petrovitch could run. Bad in that he couldn't hide.

Still no police. Not even the wail of a siren. Then again, Petrovitch had grown up on the lawless prospects of St. Petersburg. He knew to rely only on himself.

A right turn this time, and then another left. A wider street, busier, or should have been: automatic steel shutters were beginning to close over always-open foyers, and even the nose-to-tail of the rush hour was down to three sets of tail-lights scurrying for cover.

They were becoming exposed, isolated. People were pressed in doorways, cowering, covering their heads, or peering over the rims of basement wells. There were faces at windows and toughened glass portals, safe and watching the spectacle of two young idiots try and outrun a couple of pumped-up killers who wouldn't take no for an answer.

Petrovitch looked up. Regent Street was ahead, the lines of cars

stalled, unable, like him, to escape. He didn't even break step. Over the bonnet of one, the roof of another, one, two, three, and jump down on the other side. A single shot crazed a first-floor pane of smoked glass. Then left again, up the road toward the covered arcade of Oxford Street.

The mall barriers were closing. Paycops in fluorescent vests were willing them to close faster, and Oxford Circus tube was being denied them in the same way: thick metal armor rolling down over the entrances to the underground.

He had to swerve left again, turning parallel to the main street, use the back roads to get to the far end. As he got to the corner, he looked down the empty pavement. He glimpsed the two men—the same two men who had started the chase—running purposefully. They moved like athletes, for all their size. They looked like they could keep going all day.

From the first twinges in his chest and flickering darkness behind his eyes, Petrovitch knew that he couldn't. The woman didn't seem to be in much better shape: mouth-breathing, sweat-drenched, letting out little grunts of pain at each footfall. This was going to finish badly even if it didn't finish earlier.

He put his head down and kept on going because he had to. She was going to be the death of him, and he didn't even know her name. An empty space opened up in front of them: Hyde Park, all mute shadows and shades of gray. The stink rose from the site like a solid wall. A shrouded Marble Arch, always being cleaned but never quite finished, lay hidden behind wind-torn sheets of polythene and a skeleton of scaffolding. The traffic on all the roads was gridlock-solid, with barely room to squeeze between. The tube was sealed.

His vision started to grow jagged and discordant. It wasn't the stinging perspiration that was trickling down his forehead and into his eyes; it *was* his eyes; the first signs of a faint. He was running out of time. He could hear a klaxon blare over the sound of his heartbeat in his ears, but couldn't decipher what it meant.

He was going down, and his pace faltered.

She took over. She was surprisingly strong. She looked small and light and weak, but Petrovitch felt the tendons in his arm stretch as she pulled him along. Their positions reversed, he trailed uselessly, almost blind.

He could tell enough to know that they were going the wrong way. They should have headed into the park, lost themselves in the labyrinthine shanties, and perhaps even the gunmen would have balked at going in after them: crossing Hyde Park was something that no one chose to do of their own free will.

Instead, they ran through lane after lane of stalled, cringing cars

and down a broad, deserted pavement.

And the two men still pursued them. They were gaining on them, arms pumping, knees lifting and slamming down like pistons, driving them closer. Petrovitch was past caring. Any second now.

When it didn't happen, when the pain grew so intense that his whole being felt touched by fire, that was the moment he stumbled and fell, sprawling half in the gutter. She stopped, and started to drag him by his shoulders.

Then there was someone else who scooped him up like a bundle of damp washing and carried him to a place that was cool and high.

The device in his chest finally, finally decided it was going to work. He jerked like a fish, shuddered and twitched. Once wasn't enough, not this time. It tripped again, sending enough current down implanted wires to shock his heart into remembering how to pump blood properly.

He gasped, and blinked his eyes to clear them of splinters of light.

Two men, two women, and him lying on bare wooden boards in between. Two guns on one side, one on the other, no clear idea of what was going on or where he was. He could see stone pillars, broken colored light, dark-stained wood. He could smell polish and prayers.

A church, then; he was in a church.

He tried to sit up, feeling every flicker of pain from his ribcage as a white-hot flame. He made it to his elbows before the effort grew too great. The only comfort he had was that the would-be kidnappers were aiming their Glocks at someone else for a change.

He flopped his head over to see who they were trying to threaten now.

She was a nun, fully robed, white veil framing her broad, serious face. A silver crucifix dangled around her neck, and a rosary and a holster hung at her waist. She had the biggest automatic pistol Petrovitch had ever seen clasped in her righteous right hand.

3

More frightening than the gun she was holding was her attitude of utter invulnerability. She stood like a soldier, right arm braced around the wrist by the left hand, sighting with her dominant eye, stance open and finger tickling the trigger.

She knew with absolute certainty they would never dare shoot a nun.

"Turn around, walk away," she said. "You've lost this time."

Of course, she could only aim at one of them at a time, and she did so without mercy. The target of her intentions started to crumble.

"We just want the girl," said the man. "Just the girl."

"No," said the nun. The girl in question took a step back behind the nun's skirts and played with her necklace.

"She can't get both of us," said the other man, and took an exploratory step forward.

"I wouldn't bet my life on it," said the nun. "More to the point, you shouldn't bet your life on it. I don't carry this cannon around for show."

"If I can interrupt," said Petrovitch from the floor. He swallowed around the knot of acid pain in his throat. "You don't have time for this. You see that pendant in your target's hand? It's a panic button. I'm guessing she's had her thumb jammed on it for the last few minutes, and the signal it's giving off is stationary. Which means the cavalry are going to be no more than, what, thirty seconds away?"

He would have said more, but his vision flashed white again, and he momentarily lost muscle control. The back of his head banged against the floorboards.

He heard, "What the hell's the matter with him?" and "What are we going to do?"

They weren't smart. They weren't even up to the standards of Petrovitch's old boss. He struggled to his elbows again, blinking at their stupidity. "Really. You'd better go now. Go."

The surge of electricity through his heart took him down again. For the fourth time. It had never done that before. The sparks in his sight looked like angels against the vaulted roof space.

"*Chyort,*" he whispered, then he noticed that no one had moved. He gathered what was left of his strength and hissed "Run!"

They started to edge away, and their first tentative movements rapidly translated into full flight. They burst out into the daylight, and it was there, framed against the shadow, that they were scythed down.

At the first shot, the nun flattened the girl with a sweep of her legs and threw herself on top of Petrovitch. Her veil covered his face,

forming a seal over his mouth. He couldn't breathe, but as she lay across his ribs with her full weight, there wasn't much point in trying. She had even managed to pin his arms; he couldn't so much as bat his hands against her. He struggled weakly and uselessly. He was powerless to save himself; of all the stupid ways to go, crushed by a nun.

The roar of gunfire went on for longer than was ever necessary. Someone determinedly made a point while Petrovitch meekly suffocated.

It became abruptly silent, and after a pause that was almost his undoing, the nun looked up. Her veil swung to one side, and he managed to drag in a wheezing gasp of air.

He coughed, and filled his lungs again. The air tasted of dust, cordite and blood.

"Stay down," she said, not realizing that Petrovitch had no option but to obey. Figures made their way through the haze and picked their way over the ruined bodies of the two dead men.

These men also had guns; long-barrelled assault rifles with smoke still curling from their muzzles. They carried them easily, like workmen who knew they'd completed the day's task.

"Miss Sonja?" said one, a pocket-sized man with a shaved head. He stepped out of the clearing air and looked sadly around him.

"I'm here," said the woman. She picked herself off the floor and shook out the hem of her skirt.

"We should go," said the man, "Your father is worried about you." He brushed a chip of plaster off his suited shoulder while he too waited. The rest of his team materialized behind him. To a man—and they were all men—they were Japanese.

"I'm ready." She walked toward the doors, the security men surrounding her. She stopped at the entrance to the porch, and looked round at the only other people who had helped her that morning. She screwed up her face, and came back. She leaned over them, and Petrovitch thought it an extraordinary thing that her hair had managed to fall into place with no effort at all.

"Miss Sonja? The police will be here soon. It would be best to avoid them at the moment."

She held up her hand in a way that indicated that she was in charge now.

"Is he going to be Okay?" she asked the nun.

"I think," she said, with a surprising amount of viciousness for someone in holy orders, "he needs an ambulance."

"I'll have one called. Hijo?"

"Yes, Miss Sonja. At once."

"I do have to go." But then she knelt next to Petrovitch, her

presence forcing the nun back on her haunches. “Who are you?”

Petrovitch panted to give himself a voice. “If you’re *yakuza,* I don’t want you to know.”

“*Yakuza?* What a ridiculous idea.”

His gaze moved from her outrage to the nun’s skepticism, to the gun-toting suits glancing out of the door and eager to be away.

“I’m not getting involved with you,” he said.

“Involved? You saved my life.”

“Stupid me. Now do me a favor and save mine: go.”

She looked hurt; more upset at his slight than at nearly getting kidnapped. Sirens penetrated the thick stone walls, and she picked herself up from the floor. The man she called Hijo was trying to bury his agitation beneath the sheen of civility; he even had the temerity to take her gently at one elbow and guide her outside.

The last rifle-toting gunman left the church, leaving Petrovitch, the nun, and two ruined corpses.

“Do I get to find out who you are?” she asked. She released the slide on her automatic, discharging the shiny unspent bullet into her palm.

“Petrovitch,” said Petrovitch.

“Just Petrovitch?” She clicked on the safety and slid out the magazine to click the bullet back into the clip.

“It’ll do.”

“Sister Madeleine,” she said. “I’m a Joan.”

“Yeah. Figured. What with the Papal seal on your *pushka* and your complete lack of fear.” He gave up trying to sit, and attempted to roll over instead. The effort was too much for him, and he concluded that he might actually be dying.

“Is there anything I can do?”

He looked up into her big brown eyes properly, now that no one was trying to kill him. His heart stopped again, only for a moment, but he put it down to his arrhythmia. “If you haven’t got a scalpel, some bolt cutters and a set of rib spreaders, no. The defibrillator that’s part of my pacemaker seems to have crashed.”

“Crashed?”

“Normally I go to a hospital and they reprogram it. Five-minute job. Only I need it to work right now and I don’t think I have five minutes.

She slung her automatic into her holster and scooped him up in her arms. It was only then that he realized that she was huge. Tall, proportionately built; a giantess. She carried him out to the streetside and stood on the last wide step of a series that led up to the main doors.

The traffic had flooded back onto the road, as had the pedestrians

to the pavement. Sister Madeleine spotted over everyone's heads that, miracle of miracles, an ambulance was fighting its way through to the curb in a blizzard of red and blue.

"At least your little friend did that right." She adjusted the weight in her arms, aimed his feet toward the mass of people that stood in her way, and barged through. From the way he kept feeling impacts on the soles of his boots, he realized that the sight of a two-meter-tall fully-robed novice nun cradling a semi-conscious man wasn't strange enough for hardened Metrozone residents to take much notice. The sister was determined, however, and they met the ambulance as it shuddered to a halt.

The paramedics took him from her, and laid him efficiently on a stretcher inside the van. He watched as they attacked his shirt with scissors and pasted cold electrodes to his skinny chest. It was only when they tried to put a mask over his face that he rebelled and turned his face away.

"The nun. Where is she?"

She climbed up and crouched down. "What is it?"

If she'd been expecting a message for someone or a death-bed confession, she was going to be disappointed. "My bag."

"Your what?"

"My bag. Courier bag."

"It's back in the church." She pulled back the side of her veil so she could press her ear close to his mouth. "Is there something important in it?"

"Hardware. Cost me a small fortune and I've not even turned it on yet."

She sat back. "A computer? Your heart's about to fail and you're worried about a shiny new computer?"

"Look after it for me."

"Petrovitch," she said, "you, you geek."

"Sister," said the paramedic who was wincing at the vital signs on his handheld screen. "In or out, but we're moving."

She made to leave, but ended up reaching out of the cabin and pulling the doors shut, trapping herself inside. "Just drive," she muttered, and sat awkwardly in a fold-down seat that wasn't anywhere near her size. She pulled her veil straight and reached for her rosary to compose herself.

Sister Madeleine watched Petrovitch flat-line three times in the ten minutes it took to get him to the hospital, and each time he came back to life again he searched the interior of the ambulance for her.

Some of the time, he was thinking about his beautiful piece of bespoke kit, lying untended on a pew in a city-center church where anyone could just walk in and take it.

But part of him wondered what she was thinking, and he couldn't work that out at all.

It involved less surgery and more coding. No one cut him wide open, which he was grateful for. The chip that was supposed to control his errant heart was pulled bloodily out through a hole, and a new one slotted into place. He was kept conscious throughout.

The morphine and exhaustion made him drowsy though, and at some point when they were sewing up the access wound with short, blunt tugs of black thread, he allowed himself the luxury of falling asleep.

He dreamed: cold snow, cold wind, crystal-black nights and needle-bright stars. He dreamed of ribbons of auroral color above the blank skyline, of the Soviet murals that decorated the foyers of the underground. He dreamed of good vodka and good friends.

When he woke up, he found that he'd left all that behind and exchanged it for a pale cream room with hospital bed, polarizing filters on the window and an amazonian nun in the corner. Perhaps the nun was optional; then again, for one to come as standard made as much sense as anything in his life ever did.

"How long?" he asked.

"Hour, maybe," she said. She stood by his bed and looked around. "This must cost a fortune."

"More than my modest insurance could afford." Petrovitch pushed himself up with his hands and accepted the automatic movement of his pillows. Sister Madeleine looked down to see what her hands were doing—shaping and plumping—and she consciously stopped herself.

"So?"

Petrovitch leaned back. He could feel the tightness in his chest, but no pain. That was good. "Miss Sonja wanted to know who I was. The only way she could do that was to pick up the tab on my hospital bill. It'll be no more than small change for someone like her, and she'll consider herself clever because she's found out who I am."

Sister Madeleine shrugged. "You got something out of it too."

"Yeah. Why do you think I didn't tell her my name?"

She saw his sly smile. "You were dying, and you saw the opportunity to get a room upgrade?"

"And a private ambulance. I didn't need her gratitude, I needed her influence. And look: I'm still alive."

Her eyes grew large. "That's, that's…"

"What?" Petrovitch was nonplussed by her reaction. "Just because you didn't work it out."

"Why? Why would someone like you want to help someone like

her?" She put her hands on her hips and waited for Petrovitch to answer. When he didn't, she said: "You know what? I don't care. I haven't got the energy to waste on it. You know where to find me if you want your little box of tricks back."

She strode to the door, the second time that day a pretty woman had turned her back on him and walked away.

"I don't," he said. "I don't know where to find you. I wasn't aware of where I was for the last five minutes or so of the chase."

She faced the closed door. "So you want me to tell you? What if I don't? What then?"

"I'll work it out. It can't be that difficult. Five minutes, maybe. Ten, then—tops. All I want is my bag back. Really." He had no idea why he was having this conversation. "Sister?"

"Saint Joseph of Arimathea, Edgware Road." She twisted the doorknob, and the door swung aside.

"Sister?"

"What?"

He thought about mentioning that she had nearly suffocated him with that stupid head-dress of hers, and for once found that sarcasm died on his tongue. "Thank you. I'm grateful."

She shrugged again. "Doing good things is in the job description, Petrovitch." She looked down at the patient, crumpled man sitting across the corridor from her. "Police are here."

She left, robes billowing out behind her. Neither man, the one in the bed, the one in the chair, had the authority to stop her.

4

Eventually, having watched the sister stamp angrily down to the first corner and disappear, the policeman got up wearily from his chair and wandered in. He ignored Petrovitch at first, and walked around, touching the furnishings, playing with the window controls, pouring himself a glass of water from the jug on the bedside table.

Petrovitch looked over the top of his glasses at the man as he drank, one gulp, two gulps, three.

"Do you mind if I sit down?" the man asked, wiping his mouth on his jacket sleeve, then sat down anyway without waiting for an answer. "There's always too much standing up in this job."

He patted his pockets for his warrant card, and passed it over to Petrovitch with an air of distraction: he was already looking for something else in a different place.

Petrovitch inspected the card: Chain, Henry—Detective Inspector, Metropolitan Police. The hologram looked twenty years out of date, because the Chain in front of him had far more wrinkles and much less hair. His head was flaring under the lights, the thin strands dotted haphazardly over his scalp illuminated from below as well as above.

Petrovitch passed the card back, and Chain opened the cover of his police handheld. The detective chewed the stylus for a moment, then pecked at an icon.

"Right then," said Chain, and interrupted himself with a volley of wet coughing. "Sorry. It's the air. I'll start again: Petrovitch, Samuil. Twenty-two, citizen of the Russian Federation, here on a university scholarship. Address, three-four-one-five, Clapham Transit A. You will stop me if I mess up here? I know these things are supposed to be accurate, but you know what it's like." He paused. "You do know what it's like, don't you?"

Petrovitch cleared his throat. "I know."

"Your English good? Don't need a translator or a dictionary?"

"I'm fluent."

"This is just an interview, you know. You haven't done anything wrong. I'm just asking a few questions. If you think you might need a lawyer, do say." Chain coughed again, an episode that left him breathless. He twisted round in his chair and poured himself some more water. "Nice room."

Petrovitch nodded slowly. Either the man was brilliant or a buffoon. Only time would tell which.

"You are Okay to answer a few questions, aren't you? Doctors told me you'd died several times on the way here. I can come back later." Chain touched the video icon on his handheld and hunted for

the right clip.

"*Yobany stos!* Get on with it."

Chain glanced up. "I know that one. Just so you know, *yeban'ko maloletnee*."

Petrovitch chuckled, then grimaced at the discomfort. "Ask your questions, Detective."

"This," said Chain, "this is you, early this morning." He passed Petrovitch the handheld.

Petrovitch watched himself, identified with a floating yellow tag, crawl along the pavement at Green Park. A red tag moved into view, and the two crossed briefly. The screen went blank.

"Where's the rest?" he asked.

"The cameras over the whole block went down." Chain took the handheld back. "Very professional. But we know what happened. We know where you went, and we know how it ended."

He opened up another file, and showed Petrovitch a picture of two bullet-ridden gangsters lying in a mutual pool of thick red blood.

Petrovitch looked, then looked away. "If you know what happened, why do you need me?"

"We—I—was hoping you could tell me why. Why would Samuil Petrovitch risk his scrawny neck intervening in a kidnapping that has nothing to do with him? Or at least, seems to have nothing to do with him. You weren't some sort of Plan B, were you?"

"Why don't you ask them?" Petrovitch nodded at the screen. "They look like the sort of guys who could come up with a really good Plan B."

"Point taken." Chain reamed an eye with his finger until it squelched. "Do you know who it was you saved?"

"No. Never seen her before in my life."

Chain pressed his lips together and ruminated. "If I had a euro for every time someone said that to me. "Oh, Detective, I have no idea whose body this is in the boot of my car. Never seen her before in my life." You genuinely don't know?"

"No."

"Don't keep up with the celebrity news?"

"Do I look like someone who uses celeb porn?" Petrovitch grunted. "I study high-energy physics."

The detective sighed. "She's Sonja Oshicora. Ring any bells now?"

"No."

"Oshicora Corporation?"

"No."

"You heard what happened to Japan, right? The whole falling-into-the-sea thing?"

"I heard. It wasn't my fault, though."

“Very droll, Petrovitch. So, let’s just recap.” He dropped the handheld in his lap and held out his sausage-like fingers. “One, you were minding your own business, proceeding in a westerly direction on Green Park. Two, you witnessed the attempted kidnapping of some woman you don’t know or recognize. Three, you drop one of the kidnappers—good work, by the way—and run for it, keeping this woman with you despite the fact you’re now being shot at.”

“How many?”

“Six dead. Twelve wounded, five of them critically. They’re in a different hospital somewhere, in wards a lot less posh than this one.” Chain waggled his little finger. “Four, after a tour of central London, you pitch up in a Catholic church. The kidnappers enter, then leave without their intended target. They die on the steps—how, I can guess, but the CCTV goes mysteriously blank again. Five, I get there. Oshicora’s gone, you’ve gone, the Joan’s gone. Have I got it about right?”

“More or less,” admitted Petrovitch.

“So I’ll ask you again: why?” The detective leaned back in his chair, and closed his eyes. A little while later, he murmured, “I’m still here.”

Petrovitch stroked the end of his nose, and eventually pushed his glasses back up his face. “I don’t know why,” he said.

“You don’t sound so certain of that.”

“I genuinely don’t.” His tone of voice earned him a glance from one heavy-lidded eye.

“Altruism? Chivalry? Civic duty? Random act of kindness? Perhaps you’re a secret crime fighter, and you didn’t have time to put your underpants on the outside of your trousers.”

“*Idi v’zhopu*.”

“We get them, you know. Costumed vigilantes, and for good or ill, without the superpowers.” Chain shuffled himself more erect, and played with the computer in his lap. “They’re just about one step up from the death squads we used to have during Armageddon. Were you here for that?”

“Before my time, Inspector. Look, I don’t know what I can do for you. I’m the victim of a crime, but the two criminals who shot at me and murdered all those people are dead. This Sonja woman…”

“Girl. Seventeen.”

“I don’t know her. It was an accident.” Petrovitch scratched at his chest. “Would you rather I’d not done anything?”

Chain said nothing, just looked into the distance with narrowed eyes.

“Oh, you’re joking.” Throwing off the bed covers, Petrovitch swung his legs out over the side of the bed. “I’ve walked into

someone's private crusade. So what did they do to you? Kill your rookie partner, blow up your car, boil your pet rabbit?"

"No," said Chain. "They just really piss me off."

"I'm not playing your game, Inspector. You can take your questions and you can shove them up your *zhopu*." He found his clothes in the bedside locker. Except his shirt, of course. "Despite the tendency my heart has to stop working at critical moments, I quite like the life I have."

He sat on the edge of the mattress and pulled off the hospital's green gown, dressing as quickly as he could. Chain made no effort to stop him, just watched him as he efficiently laced his boots.

"I know where to find you," said Chain as Petrovitch stood warily, testing which way was up. "So, of course, do they."

"I don't care."

"Perhaps you ought. Perhaps you'll find it harder than you think to pretend all this never happened." Chain tucked his handheld away, and gripped the arms of the chair. He pushed himself up.

"I don't owe them. Quite the reverse." Petrovitch decided he could make it outside without falling over, and tried his luck.

"My point precisely," said Chain. He beat Petrovitch to the door handle, and held the door open. "They owe you. This—this lovely room, the ambulance, the private doctors, the best of care. That's just the start."

Petrovitch hesitated, one hand on the wall. "What do you mean?"

"Honor, Petrovitch. You saved Hamano Oshicora's only child from a fate worse than death. You saved both her and the family name. They owe you big time. Why," he said, "you're almost one of the family yourself now."

"If I don't have to play along with you, I don't have to play along with them."

Chain motioned Petrovitch through the door first. "You'll find them a lot more persuasive than me."

"I'm pretty good at saying no." Petrovitch limped out into the corridor. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I'm late for work."

"You're a student, you don't get to use that excuse. But I'll give you a lift if you want." Chain smiled; it wasn't pleasant. "You get to ride in a police car."

"I'm not a little kid, Inspector."

"No. You're a poor immigrant who's just had a run-in with two of the biggest crime syndicates in the Metrozone and ended up in a hospital because your heart is on its last legs. If hearts have legs, of course."

Petrovitch walked away, dismissing the policeman with a wave of his hand. "Yeah. I'll be fine."

"It's not what your doctor said."

He came back. "What did he say?"

Chain shrugged his shoulders. "If you're going to discharge yourself without telling anyone, you'll never find out. Until it's too late."

Petrovitch stared him down.

Chain reached out and tapped Petrovitch's sternum. "He said you've damaged that one beyond repair. You need a replacement."

"Maybe."

"You can always ask for a second opinion. But I wouldn't take too long about it."

Petrovitch considered matters. "Your bedside manner sucks. See you, Inspector." He turned on his heel and buried his hands in his pockets.

"New hearts cost," called Chain. "You could always ask the Oshicoras to cough up for a replacement, seeing how you wrecked the old one in their service."

"Yeah. *Perestan mne jabat mozgi svojimi voprosami*." Petrovitch walked to the end of the corridor, past the verdant pot-plants balanced on every window sill, through the doors that cut him off from the despondent figure of Detective Inspector Chain.

He reached for his wrist and ripped off the hospital tag: somewhere on a computer, the action would have been registered, and someone would already be looking for him. Not because he was important, but because the people picking up the bill were.

Petrovitch didn't want to be an asset. He wanted to be invisible again.

He threw the tag into the leaf crown of a fern and caught the first lift down to the ground. He watched the counter topple toward zero, and rested his forehead against the cool metal of the wall. By the time he reached the foyer, he'd made his decision.

It didn't look like a hospital. It looked like a hotel, which he supposed it was, really: a hotel with operating theaters. It was busy, controlled, efficient. Customers and staff moved through their booking-in procedures with whispered courtesies.

Paycops guarded a screen at the ever-revolving door. Even they looked happy and relaxed.

Petrovitch spotted a vacant chair in front of a huge circular desk. He sat down and waited for the clerk behind it to focus on him through her holographic screen.

"Good afternoon, sir," she said accurately: the clock had just tipped past noon. "Welcome to Angel Hope Hospital."

"I need a new heart," he said baldly. "How much?"

He had her attention. "It very much depends on what is clinically

necessary. If you can submit a cardiologist's report, I might be able to book an appointment for you." While she talked, he could tell she was judging both him and the size of his bank balance. "Our transplant teams pride themselves on using only the very latest technology."

"Okay, save me the sales pitch. I knew this day would come sooner or later, so I've had a lifetime of weighing up perfectly the pros and cons. How much for a vat-grown organic heart?"

She smiled sweetly, revealing two rows of perfectly white teeth. "I'm afraid that currently comes in at two hundred and fifty thousand euros. Surgery, post-operative care and rehabilitation are extra. I can download a list of charities that might be able to help in funding all or part of a less expensive clinical package. We offer several budget solutions that solve most chronic cardiac conditions."

Petrovitch was watching carefully for her reaction. He pushed his glasses back up his nose, and asked: "Do you take cash?"

5

Petrovitch put the hospital's datacard in his top pocket and followed the sweep of the revolving doors out into the daylight.

Private cars were queuing to drop people off under the covered entrance before pulling back out to join the mayhem of the midday roads. As one drove off, another replaced it, wheelchairs or a walker unit being brought to the passenger door as required.

Two cars weren't moving, though. They were parked opposite, one behind the other, fat wheels up on the concrete curb. One was new—clean, black paintwork, black tinted glass, a beast of a car, tall and proud and sturdy. The other was a dented wreck with mismatched wings and a plastic bag taped over the rear-offside window.

Sitting nonchalantly around the first car were three Japanese men, wraparound info shades on their expressionless faces. Their suits were identical down to the creases in their trousers and the bulges in their jackets. He even recognized one of them: shaven-headed Hijo.

Lolling on the bonnet of the other car was Chain, who was glaring at the world in general and the men in front of him in particular.

Hijo spotted Petrovitch first. He stood erect, adjusted his black leather gloves, and nodded to his men. Chain saw the change in attitude of his quarry and glanced over to the doors. He slid off his car and shuffled his feet.

Petrovitch looked from one car to the other like he was sizing up two different but equally unappealing destinies. One of Hijo's men even gave a little bow.

"Thank you, gentlemen," said Petrovitch under his breath, "but I'm not stupid."

He turned away, feeling four sets of eyes burning into his back until he disappeared into the crowd. He let himself be carried for a while, crossing two intersections, taking the opportunity before the lights cycled green to look around him and see if he was being followed.

That idea was ludicrous—or had been when he'd woken up that morning. Now, it had to be part of his mental map, along with needing a new heart and accidentally abandoning a perfectly decent piece of hardware in a church.

He crossed one more road, and the buildings changed. The tall two-centuries-old town houses stopped and the massive domik sprawl of Regent's Park started: a vast heap of rusting shipping containers, stepped like blood-smeared Aztec pyramids until the peaks were high in the heavens. It made his own Clapham A look tiny, and legends had grown around the most inaccessible habs, deep inside the pile:

Container Zero, the last Armageddonist, the Zoo.

He hadn't realized he was so close, didn't want to be so close. No one should think he had a connection with it. He took a step back so that he was in the lee of an anonymous gray box, a piece of left-over street furniture from an earlier age. He looked up to the topmost container, adorned with a fluttering green banner and a small windmill that spun to a blur in the wind.

Petrovitch pushed his glasses up his nose, and walked off, heading west down Marylebone.

It was only a kilometer or so. He should have been able to manage it without effort. He had to stop twice, once at a roadside kiosk to swap all of the low value coins he could find in the depths of his pockets for a bar of chocolate, and once because he needed to sit down, just for five minutes.

By the time he was walking in the shadow of the flyover, he was spent. He should have gone home, slept, had something to eat. Work could have waited, collecting his rat could have waited. He'd made the wrong decision, temporarily thrown by the reception party outside the hospital. He needed to be thinking more clearly.

At least he was at the church. Seven broad brick semi-circular steps led up to the open doors. There was a railing; he made use of it. When he got to the top, he saw brushed sand and smelled bleach. Perhaps it had been Sister Madeleine's job to scrub the blood out of the stonework.

He stepped around the sea of sand, taking time to run his finger around one of the pale bullet holes splintered into the dark wood door. Inside, a priest with crow-black hair was standing at the front, obscuring the altar with his outstretched arms, and maybe a dozen people scattered throughout the echoing space.

The crucifix hanging from a roof beam had extra stigmata, and the Holy Mother was missing her outstretched hand even while she was cradling the Infant in the other. White marks on the floorboards indicated hurriedly swept plaster dust.

Petrovitch sat himself in the very back pew and waited for this particular piece of religious theater to end. The host was elevated while a white-robed acolyte rang a bell. As the priest turned to face the congregation, his gaze fixed on the latecomer.

A breath of air tickled the hairs on the back of Petrovitch's neck. The nun was standing behind him, clicking through her rosary with one hand, the other resting on the butt of her Vatican special. She looked down sternly and dared him to speak, move, or do anything that might interrupt mass.

He didn't have the energy to defy her, no matter how much fun it might have been. And he wanted his bag back without it being

stamped on. He sat through the rest of the liturgy, hearing the words in plain English, but not understanding the symbols. People stood, sat and knelt at intervals, then trooped to the altar rail to receive a piece of translucent wafer.

Then the service was over, and it was him, the priest and Sister Madeleine.

"So soon, Petrovitch?" said the nun. She turned and heaved the doors shut. "Strange the things you find important."

"Yeah," he said. The priest had disrobed, and was walking slowly down the center aisle in his black cassock and Roman collar. "It's not like I came to see you."

"That would never happen," she said, banging the bolts into place. The sound reverberated around the nave. "This is Father John, priest in charge."

"Father," said Petrovitch, and raised his hand briefly. The man who came over and shook it with wary firmness couldn't have been much older than he was.

"What do I call you?" said the father, scraping his fingers through his heavy fringe.

"Petrovitch will do. Is it me, or is the world being run by a bunch of kids?"

"Father O'Donnell was murdered two months ago. The parish needed someone." Father John sat in the pew in front and twisted round to face Petrovitch. "I go where I'm sent."

"Very noble, I'm sure."

"But bringing extra trouble to our doorstep when we've more than enough of our own, that's not. The sanctuary's violated yet again, mass is delayed, and the police are here, throwing their weight around."

"When Father O'Donnell died, they didn't want to know," said Sister Madeleine. "No investigation, no forensics, no arrests, no one to face justice. We know who did it, but no one's interested."

"I'm sorry about that," said Petrovitch.

"I'm here to make sure they don't need to let us down again," she said. Her face hardened and she stared into the distance.

The priest picked underneath his nails. "A good man dies, and nothing. You and that girl turn up, and we have everything we didn't have before. And who for? Two dead criminals."

"If it was a detective inspector called Chain, don't take it personally: he's got a grudge against the Oshicoras."

Father John scratched at his ear, where there was a notch missing from the cartilage. "Sister Madeleine shouldn't have left the church, either. I've told her novice master. Penance will have to be done."

Petrovitch glanced at the man and raised his eyebrows. "She's in

trouble? Because of me?" He started to smile.

Father John tried to wipe the smirk off Petrovitch's face with sheer force of will, but Petrovitch was having none of it. "Yes. She's here to protect her church and her priest. Not passing strangers. A member of the Order of Saint Joan has legal exemptions while she's doing her duty, none when she goes off and does her own thing."

"She didn't shoot anyone."

"She could have done a life sentence if she had." Father John's voice rose in volume until he was yelling, bare centimeters from Petrovitch. "She's not the police. She's not even a paycop. I don't thank you for putting her vocation in jeopardy before it's barely begun."

"Yeah. Okay. I get the message, Father. Just get me my bag; sooner I get what I want, the sooner you can get me out of here." Petrovitch made sure his smile grew wider and he snorted. "You take yourself far too seriously."

The father got up and cast him a baleful look. "Don't bring bad people here."

"Since I've been called a bad man once already this morning, I'll have to count myself among their number."

Father John stalked off to the vestry to collect Petrovitch's bag. Sister Madeleine leaned down and waited until the father was out of sight. "Come with me," she whispered.

"I'm just going to get you into more trouble, and none of it the interesting kind."

"I can look after myself. Just come." She walked to a side door, turned the heavy key and pulled the bolts aside. Stale air blew in as she worked the latch. Petrovitch dragged himself out of the pew and followed.

There were stairs, going up in a tight spiral, which she had difficulty negotiating because of the width of each step and the height of the ceiling, and he had problems with because he grew rapidly breathless as he ascended.

She opened another door, a trap door which she unbolted and threw back. Light poured in, making them both blink. She led the way onto the roof of the tower, and turned a full circle, taking in the view.

It wasn't much. Immediately to the north was a raised section of dual carriageway, crammed with traffic. South and east were the cramped streets of old London, the skyline filled with the skeletons of cranes and new buildings, each trying to outdo the last for height. To the west was the rising ground of Notting Hill, where the wealthier post-Armageddon refugees had squatted.

Petrovitch leaned heavily on the parapet and wiped his damp forehead with the back of his hand. "I can't believe you've got me all

the way up here just for this."

"Look," she said, pointing beyond the flyover. "See those buildings? That's the Paradise housing complex. It used to be St. John's Wood, before they bulldozed half of it."

"Yeah," said Petrovitch. There were seven tower blocks, ugly, utilitarian shapes, their bases hidden in a yellow haze. The concrete looked scarred and cracked. "Doesn't look like they deserve the new name."

"They call themselves the Paradise militia," she said, and leaned on an adjacent piece of brickwork, staring out over the city with faraway eyes. "They run the blocks, and everybody in them. It's like a city-within-a-city, with an economy based on crime. That's who Father O'Donnell took on."

"So they killed him. Shame, but I don't know why you're telling me this."

"I want you to understand." She tilted her head to face him, brushing the side of her veil away where it obscured her view of him. "Father John…"

"I understand too well. He's just a boy. Like me." Petrovitch laughed, and it hurt in a way that reminded him that he was still alive and how much he had to lose. "Father John thinks he can take the place of the martyred O'Donnell and win the souls of Paradise. He's deluded by dreams of glory and can't see that he's going to go the same way."

"They hate us. They act like we're another gang, moving in on their territory. You're right: they'd kill Father John, too, if they could. But he has me," she said.

"So what's your life expectancy measured in? Weeks or days?" He looked her in the eye, briefly, before feeling the need to count the lace holes in his boots.

She gathered her blowing veil and held it over her shoulder. "Someone has to do something."

"I bet that's what the Armageddonists said, right before they…"

He didn't finish his sentence. His feet left the ground and, for a moment, he thought he was going over the parapet.

"Don't," she screamed in his face. Her fists were balled up in his collar. "Don't ever. This is their fault. Everything. I could have been little Madeleine instead of this. I could have been normal."

Then the calm after the storm. She lowered him rather than just letting go. His toes gratefully found the concrete roof.

"I'm not like them," she said. She straightened his jacket out, sweeping her long fingers over the folds in the cloth. His skin burned under her touch. "I could never be like them."

Petrovitch dared to move, retreating until his back was against

the brickwork. When it eventually came, his voice was high and panicked. “I’m going now. For both our sakes.”

She waited until he was ducking down out of sight before calling after him. “Do you believe me?” she asked.

“What? That you feel the need to die in a futile gesture? Yeah. Russians have been throwing their lives away for nothing for centuries: it’s in the blood.” He started down the steep steps. “I don’t intend to join them.”

“So why did you try and save that girl?”

“I didn’t try,” he whispered defiantly. “I succeeded.”

Father John was waiting for him at the bottom of the staircase, holding up Petrovitch’s bag in one hand. His expression said that he’d won at least one small victory.

Petrovitch took the bag from him, unzipped the pouch and slid his hand inside. The rat had gone. All he found was his nearly-spent cash card and a flimsy piece of paper.

“Oh, this has gone completely *pizdets*.” He pulled out the paper, knowing what was on it already. But he still had to look.

It was a Metropolitan Police Evidence Seizure form. A serial number, a few ticked boxes, and a place for the officer’s printed name and signature. Petrovitch screwed it up in his fist and threw it at the floor.

“It turns out you didn’t need to come back here after all,” said the young priest. “I appreciate the irony, even if you don’t.”

“Why the hell didn’t the bastard *ment* tell me this in the hospital?” Petrovitch bent down to scoop up the crumpled form, and laboriously started to flatten out the creases over his knee.

“I’m sure he had his reasons. By the way, this is a church. I’d appreciate you not swearing in it.”

Petrovitch considered his options. If the priest didn’t hold to turning the other cheek, hitting him might end badly. But just skulking off didn’t strike him as being appropriate either. “*Past zakroi, podonok*.”

Though the words were incomprehensible, his sentiment was resonant in his delivery. Father John’s face grew hard, and he took a step forward. “Get out.”

“Gladly.” Still pressing the piece of paper flat between his hands, he walked toward the doors. He caught sight of Sister Madeleine standing quite still beside the tower staircase.

He wondered if she would have intervened between him and the father. He knew it was her duty, but she looked so disappointed with him that he rather thought she would have just stood by and watched him get the beating he most likely deserved.

6

Petrovitch had had enough; enough for one day, most likely the week. And still he didn't go home.

He rode the nearby Circle Line tube to South Kensington, then the underground travelator the length of Exhibition Road. All the way, he felt a dull, distant fear, a sense of having done something that might mean nothing or everything. He'd succeeded in saving a stranger—this Sonja Oshicora—and failed himself: burned out his heart, become exposed to the unwanted attentions of both criminals and police.

He'd been noticed, and that wasn't what he wanted at all. Time would tell whether he'd been snagged enough by events for his life to unravel like an old knitted jumper.

He still had one place of safety though, somewhere he could slip into a comfortable, familiar role without anyone asking stupid questions like "why?"

Pif was there already, standing at the whiteboard, marker pen in hand, perfectly still but for the flick of her eyes. She was so absorbed in her work that she didn't initially notice Petrovitch wander in and slump into a wheely chair behind her. The chair rolled back across the floor and clattered into a redundant filing cabinet, empty but for empties.

He leaned back and pried two strips of an ancient set of Venetian blinds apart to see the world outside. "The limits on that integral should be minus infinity to plus infinity, not one to infinity," he said. "It's a waveform."

"It wasn't meant to be," she said, "when I wrote this stupid equation out. Where have you been?"

"Getting shot at." He let the blinds ping back. "Being thrown into the back of an ambulance, I think, or how else would I have got to the hospital? Having my internal defib machine poked. Nearly thrown off the top of a church by a two-meter-tall nun."

"Orly?" She stepped forward, made her black hand blacker by rubbing out the offending symbols and replacing them with the correct ones, using her impossibly neat copperplate.

"Yeah. Really." He unzipped his jacket and peered at his chest. The ends of black thread sprouted from his skin like a half-buried spider. He had a thought and scooted across the room to his desk. Buried in the bottom of a drawer was a T-shirt, the relic of a death metal concert some six months earlier.

Pif turned around just as Petrovitch had shucked his jacket onto the back of the chair.

"Eww," she said. "Sam, some warning, Okay?"

He ignored her protests and dragged the black T-shirt on over his head. It was slightly too small; it accentuated his thinness and rode up above his waistband when he raised his arms.

"Have you got anything to eat?" he asked, looking through the rest of his desk, then under the piles of printout and monographs. "I'm not feeling so good."

"In a minute," she replied, glancing back over her shoulder at the whiteboard.

"I'll never do your coding for you again."

"All right, all right." She threw up her hands and raided her bag for an energy bar.

When she'd launched it across the room at him, and he'd missed it, she pulled her own chair toward his and sat backward on it, resting her chin on the backrest.

Petrovitch scrabbled on the floor for the foil-wrapped bar, and crawled awkwardly to sitting again. They looked at each other, then she reached forward and took his chin in her fine fingers, turning it left and right. Her fingernails were painted with randomly generated Mandelbrot sets.

"How bad is it?" Her beaded hair jiggled softly as she talked.

"Bad enough," he said, and finally tore through the wrapping. He continued around mouthfuls of sweet, sticky crumbs. "The defib machine took too long to kick in, and then it wouldn't stop firing. A lot of heart muscle had gone anoxic, and I won't get that function back."

"What are you going to do?"

"I have two options. Get a new heart or die soon."

She blinked slowly. "You mean cake or death?"

"Pretty much, except the cake I want costs two hundred and fifty kiloeuros, plus expenses."

Pif whistled air out of her mouth. "So what are you going to do? Will the university spring for it?"

"I'm a private student. The foundation that supplies my scholarship will cover it." He screwed up the wrapper and dropped it in the bin. "Have you anything else?"

"Yes, but… that's very generous of them. You've talked to them already?" She rolled away and dug out another energy bar.

"I didn't want to hang around. I haven't exactly got time on my side. It'll happen next Monday, when the funds are in place."

Pif was distracted again by her equation. She swung around to face it. "Why did you say it was a wave?"

Petrovitch held out his hand for the energy bar, and she placed it deftly without looking around. "I don't know. You've written it like a zeta function, but it looks more like the bastard child of a Fourier

transform."

"I should be able to solve this." She glanced at him as he crammed his mouth with food. "Do you want second place on the paper?"

"It can't hurt: Ekanobi and Petrovitch, twenty twenty-five. What is it?"

"Quantum gravity. Part of it, anyway."

He stopped chewing and got up slowly, energy bar lying forgotten on the edge of his desk. He walked to the board. "Which part?"

"The last part. I'm going to do all the calculations again, from scratch, and see if I can get to this point again. I've got it all written down…" She was breathless, more than that, hyperventilating. "Sam, I just caught a glimpse of creation."

Her body started to sway, and Petrovitch caught her, and managed to get her head down between her knees.

He crouched next to her, feeling a cold sweat spring up on his own forehead. "You've probably made a mistake, somewhere," he said.

"Probably," she agreed. "At least one. Promise me you won't die until I've gone through the proof."

"I'll try not to." He pointed at the board. "*Yobany stos,* if you pull this off…"

She looked out from under her fringe. "It means I'll never have to put up with you taking my lunch again."

"Yeah. But in Russia, lunch takes you." He sat back on his haunches and squinted at the symbols on the board through half-closed eyes. He almost saw it too, the flicker of recognition of something wholly and completely true. "How certain are you of this?"

"Certain? No. But look at it! It's beautiful."

"Take a picture of it. For posterity."

Pif gave him her phone, and he rested his elbows on her desk to reduce the camera shake. It clicked, and she was frozen in time forever, arms folded, grinning like a loon.

"Perfect," he said.

He left her bent over her notebooks. His exit elicited no more than a soft murmur and a slight inflection of her hand. He knew from past experience that she'd be like that, not moving except when absolutely necessary, blocking everything else out and using her ferocious concentration to map out all the little steps she'd made that preceded the giant leap drawn out in black marker.

Petrovitch left the university the same way he'd entered. Home for sure this time, beating the more spread out but nevertheless impressive migration to the outer parts of the Metrozone. He passed a

copy of the iconic Underground map as he glided along the travelator, squashed to one side by a phalanx of marketeers who did nothing but talk into their headset microphones and eye up their prey.

He noticed that to get to Embankment, he'd have to go through St. James's Gate. He shrugged his shoulders enough to be able to get into his bag, and look at the address on the evidence form he'd been left with.

The police station was just around the corner, and getting his hardware back was starting to become urgent. How long could it take to make a fuss at the front desk, threaten Chain with non-existent lawyers and finally get his hands on it?

He went through the screen, the turnstile, through the unconscious motions of traveling. There were three stops to go, then two, then one.

The lights flickered in a rippling pattern, from the front of the carriage to back, came on again. Then they snapped off, all the lights, plunging the passengers into utter, tunnel-enclosed darkness.

The train faltered, losing power to the motors, and someone banged hard into Petrovitch's side, driving the air from his lungs and causing him to collide with half a dozen soft, yielding shapes who cushioned the impact.

He thought he was going to fall, to slide under their feet and become trampled. At the last moment, he found vertical again.

He was almost catapulted the other way when the lights blinked on and the train surged forward. He snaked out an arm and held tightly on to a pole, looking back down the chasm his wild movement had carved in the crowded carriage.

At the far end, even as the sea of people closed the gap, was a woman, a teenager with puff-ball white hair, a black jacket that was all zips and buckles, an object in her hand that was made from transparent plastic but had a single serrated edge.

He used his free hand to press against his T-shirt; no wetness, no spreading stain. But his courier bag had a hole in it, just about kidney height. They made the damnedest things out of kevlar these days.

She disappeared from sight as the train roared out into the next station and began to squeal to a stop. He knew she was there, her mind racing like his, trying to out think his next move even as he was trying to anticipate hers.

Shouting "She's got a knife" would only serve to make everyone rush away. He needed it tightly packed. She could work her way through the crowd and have another go, but he knew she knew if she got anywhere near him, he'd have nothing to lose by exposing her; if she made the hit, she'd be gunned down by the first paycop she encountered.

He decided she'd missed her only opportunity. She should have waited, followed him out onto the platform. That's how he would have done it. Get close, in with the blade and step away. Shriek herself hoarse and panic. No one would suspect her until very much later and she'd changed her appearance completely.

"St. James's Gate. Doors opening."

If he left the train, she'd stay on. She'd let her controller know she'd failed. There might be another attempt, another day.

As passengers poured out onto the platform and away, he could see her watching him. He waited until he could slip along the glass partition to the door. She stayed where she was, her plastic knife hidden behind one of her zips. He was at the threshold, foot hovering over the gap between train and platform. She gave an almost imperceptible jerk of her head, an indication that she'd been thwarted, but that there were no hard feelings.

Petrovitch walked along beside the carriage, feeling her gaze burn between his shoulder blades. The barriers opened, and people poured on. She was gone, lost from sight. The buzzer sounded, the doors closed, and the train whipped away, chased by a whirlwind of litter and stink.

He stopped to watch the red lights slide away around the next bend, and started to shake. He gripped his bag tight and made his knuckles go white while his stomach flooded with acid that burned all the way up to his throat. He swallowed and screwed his eyes shut.

Another train was coming, buffeting the air ahead of it. He couldn't stand there for the rest of the day. He left the platform, the passengers from a westbound train pushing through the connecting tunnels ahead of him all the way to the surface.

The crush around the towers of St. James's Park was intense, but he managed to spot what he wanted within a few seconds of leaving the Underground; a basement datashop that would sell him access by the minute. He had to fight his way through to the steps down, then wrestle with the door that was swollen with heat and humidity.

Other users were glazed and expressionless as they passively absorbed their porn of choice. While Petrovitch was being led by the manager to a free cubicle, he saw one elderly man stare with fascination at a line of windswept rock peaks, the sun rising red over the col between two of them and flooding the scene with light.

"Real?"

"VR. Somewhere Outzone, up north," said the blue-turbaned proprietor. "How long do you want?"

"Five minutes on the net. You Okay with proxy servers?"

"I will be if I charge you for ten."

Petrovitch hid his location and identity behind his usual proxy, a

Tuvalu-based computer whose existence seemed to have been forgotten by its true owners. From there he went after Chain's number, and simultaneously bought a single-use virtual phone from a provider.

"Chain," said Chain.

"Detective Inspector Chain? It's Petrovitch."

"Petrovitch? That Petrovitch. How's the heart?"

"Just about intact. Yeah, Chain, look…"

"I take it this isn't a social call. Where are you now?"

"Datashop. Raj Singh's. Chain…"

There was a brief pause while he was away from the microphone. "I can see it from the window. I take it there's a reason you're not at the front desk."

"Chain, listen. Someone just tried to kill me."

Chain coughed liquidly. "They did? That was quick off the mark."

"You knew?"

"It was only a matter of time. There's probably one or two things you need to know about the mess you've gotten yourself into. Come up and we can have a chat."

"If I'm being watched, I don't want to step foot inside a police station. So the only way I want my kit back, you thieving *ment,* is for you to bring it here."

"There's paperwork to fill in," he said mildly. "Why don't I meet you, and take you over to the station?"

"You're not listening, Chain. I'm not going to appear to be helping you. I don't even want to be anywhere near you." Petrovitch checked the timer. "If this conversation is going to go nowhere, tell me now so I can set some lawyers on you."

"You can have your whatever-it-is back. It's clean. But there genuinely is paperwork, and you're not worth my while cheating the system. Come on, Petrovitch, a little trust goes a long way."

"You stole my property just so I'd have to call you, and you talk about trust?"

"Okay, point taken. I did want to check it, make sure you weren't a low-level Oshicora foot soldier, but I could have done so on the quiet and brought it back to you in the hospital." He coughed again. "I sort of believe you now, and maybe I can let the other side know you're just some stupid kid who doesn't know any better than to meddle in the affairs of gods. What do you reckon?"

Petrovitch reined in his anger. "Will you do that? Will it work?"

"Tell you what: I think I owe you, so yes. I'll do what needs to be done, though talking to Marchenkho's *organitskaya* leaves me with heartburn. Wait there, and I'll come and collect you when it's done."

"*Organitskaya?*" said Petrovitch. "*Yobany stos*."

“I imagine you probably are,” said Chain, and cut the connection.

7

Petrovitch was drinking coffee, brewed in a chipped mug in the Raj Singh back office, when Chain knocked politely on the door and let himself in.

"Ready to go, Petrovitch?" He nodded at the Sikh. "Sran? Keeping it legal?"

"As ever, Inspector Chain." Sran winked.

"One day, Sran."

"And until that day, Inspector, we'll keep trading."

"Of course you will. Leave the coffee, Petrovitch. I've better in my office." Chain looked around at all the notes pinned to the office walls, testing names, numbers, addresses for a tickle of memory.

Sran wanted Chain out quickly: he leaned forward and took the mug from Petrovitch's hands. "Pleasure doing business with you."

Petrovitch threw his bag over his shoulder, and Sran ushered them out: he shooed them all the way to the bottom of the basement steps that led up to street level to make sure the policeman didn't have time to see clearly what some of the shop's customers were doing.

The door was shut firmly behind them.

"You know him, then?" said Petrovitch, his ears adjusting to the blare of noise falling on him from above.

"I know everyone," said Chain, checking inside his jacket. He patted his shoulder holster, and unfastened a tab. "Let's make this unremarkable, shall we?"

"I thought you'd talked to whoever it was you needed to talk to."

"I did. You're not the only one with a price on your head." Chain led him up the steps, then elbowed his way into the pedestrian stream. Petrovitch was almost standing on the man's heels so as not to lose him.

They made it to the crossing and, on the next green light, shuffled across the road to a building that sat squat and lonely, surrounded on all sides by streets. Armed police—not paycops, but the real thing—guarded the entrance. They were tall and wide in their armor and utterly anonymous behind their targeting visors. One of them watched Petrovitch as he trailed after Chain, and Petrovitch saw his reflection in the curved faceplate.

He wasn't looking anywhere near as angelic as he had first thing that morning.

He also had to sign in at the desk. The man behind the bullet-proof glass was brisk and businesslike, but Petrovitch still felt a frisson of fear as the optical scanner was pressed against his eye socket.

His identity passed muster, and he was issued with a tag similar to the one he'd worn in the hospital.

"It's an offense not to keep this on while you're in the building," said the man as he watched Petrovitch clip it around his wrist. "Offense as in five years and a ten-thousand-euro fine."

"Is that all?" said Petrovitch.

"We can choose to shoot you." His gaze left Petrovitch and slid onto Chain. "He's all yours."

"You're a humorless bastard, George. Give the kid a break." Chain took Petrovitch by the arm and pulled him away toward the lifts. "Nothing else in that bag I need to know about, is there?"

"Apart from the hole where someone tried to cut me a new *zhopu,* no."

While they waited, Chain inspected the damage. "What did they use?"

"A clear plastic knife. Behind the screen, too."

"Perspex. Covert weapon of choice at the moment." The lift doors shuddered apart. "Get in, and we can have our little chat."

Petrovitch and Chain rode the lift to the seventh floor and walked along the corridor until they reached a door marked "DI H. Chain SCD6." Petrovitch hadn't seen another soul the entire time. The place was a ghost ship, adrift in the heart of the Metrozone.

Despite his disquiet, he dropped gratefully into a leather chair opposite Chain's desk, and watched without comment as the detective busied himself with the domestic chore of making proper coffee.

"I like you," said Chain, once the water had started gargling noisily through the machine. "So I'll tell you how the conversation with Marchenkho went."

"Marchenkho? The *organitskaya* boss?"

"I've got him on speed dial. Now Marchenkho might be a vodka-soused old villain who models himself on Stalin, but we go back a long way, so he takes my calls. I tell him that two of his lieutenants are in the mortuary, having been scraped off the steps of a church, and guess what?"

"He already knows?"

"He already knows." Chain went to the window and peered past the vertical blinds at the face of the glass monolith being erected opposite. "But he's not apologizing. Marchenkho apologizes a lot, especially when he doesn't mean it, so I guess he's livid that his carefully planned, once-in-a-lifetime chance at taking Oshicora's daughter hasn't worked out."

"This isn't sounding good," said Petrovitch, slumping further down.

"I mention that I'd talked to some of the witnesses. That I can link

all the innocent bystanders gunned down by those two idiot slabs of Ukrainian pork directly to him." Chain ambled back to the coffee pot, which hadn't finished, and opened up a packet of nicotine patches lying on the table. "He doesn't like that."

"Does that mean the hired help screwed up?"

"It does indeed." He peeled a patch off its backing strip, and pulled up his sleeve. He pressed it into place above his wrist, revealing that there was another just further up under his shirt cuff. "You catch on quick, Petrovitch. Tell me what happens next."

Petrovitch frowned. "You traded me," he said after a moment.

"Pretty much. I wouldn't be able to stick anything on Marchenkho, but I might take out one or two of his upper management and they'd be watching their backs for months. So he's called off the attack dogs on you in exchange for some peace and quiet." Chain got fed up from waiting, and grabbed the coffee pot. As he poured the black liquid into two mugs, spatters of steam hissed on the hot plate. "Want to know how much you were worth?"

"Not particularly."

"Two fifty."

"Thousand?" Petrovitch sat bolt upright. "*Huy na ny!*"

"Enough for a new heart, even. Marchenkho was really very cross with you." Chain pushed the coffee along the desk at Petrovitch, and sat awkwardly on one corner. "I hope you don't take milk, because I haven't got any. Or sugar. Anyway, putting out a contract takes no time at all. Information like that moves fast, and it reaches all the right people—or wrong people—very quickly. Rescinding that same contract takes longer. News that no one wants to hear crawls along. Sometimes it doesn't get to everyone who needs to know until it's too late."

"Too late. As in me."

"You've got an uncomfortable week ahead, Petrovitch." Chain slurped at his coffee. "Bugger. Hot."

While Chain dabbed at his scalded lip, Petrovitch pushed his glasses up his nose and made a little ticking noise with his tongue. "How did they get on to me so fast? I mean, I went from the church, to the hospital, to the church, to the university, and suddenly I'm a target."

"Two unpalatable options, each equally likely. First, that your face has been lifted from a CCTV file, run through facial recognition software, and your government file rifled for information on where you live, where you work, everything official about you."

"A *krisha*."

"As you say, a bent copper. More likely, you've been bugged. At the hospital, I would guess."

Petrovitch looked down. Now even his own clothes were betraying him. “So for all I know, they’re lining up outside to have a go at me.”

“They’d have to know roughly where you are first.” Chain went behind his desk and pulled out a magic wand from his top drawer. “Abracadabra.”

He waved the wand mystically over Petrovitch, top to toe, and gradually zeroed in on his right boot.

“I’m not taking it off for you,” said Chain, looking up from the floor.

Petrovitch unlaced the boot and pulled it off his foot. Chain wrinkled his nose.

“Sorry,” said Petrovitch.

“I’m guessing girls don’t feature much in your life.” Chain ran the wand around the boot, then inside. He plunged his hand in after it, and after a few moments of pulling faces, retrieved a sticky label. “There.”

Petrovitch took the wand from the detective and inspected it. A line of lights ran up one side, the bottom four already lit. When he brought it close to the label stuck to the end of Chain’s fingers, all the lights flickered on.

He peeled the label off Chain, and as he held it up to the window, he could see shadows of circuitry inside. “What do I do with it?”

“Tear it in half. But if they have access to the CCTV network, they can still track you with cameras, and they know where you live. Anywhere you can hole up safe for a few days?” Chain dragged his coffee closer, and warily tried to drink it.

“I’m a physicist, not a spy.”

“A holiday in Russia?”

“Yeah. That really isn’t a good idea.”

Chain raised his eyebrows. “How so?”

“It just isn’t. Okay?” Petrovitch stared up at the detective, who eventually shrugged and muttered something under his breath.

“Look,” said Chain, “let me explain something to you. I can’t stop you from being killed. I don’t have the resources. I can make it difficult for them, but not impossible. I might even be able to catch your murderer, but I’m sure that’s not going to be of much comfort to you. You’re going to have to help yourself. Any good at that?”

Petrovitch nodded slowly. “Yeah. Not bad.”

“Good. So what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know yet. Chain, what is it with you and the Oshicoras?”

The detective slid off his desk and paced the floor. When he spoke, it was with messianic zeal. “I was here. Here for everything. Armageddon: the shock of the first explosions—Dublin, Belfast,

Sellafield, the emptying of the countryside, the radioactive rain, the streets choked with refugees, kids—so many kids without their parents—everywhere. We could have lost control in so many different ways, torn apart from the inside, swamped from the outside, or just one of those fucking heretics with their holy nuclear bombs getting across the M25: but we didn't. We kept it together. We took everybody in. Housed them. Fed them. Found something for them to do."

Petrovitch sighed, and Chain made a rumbling cough.

"Am I boring you?" he asked.

"Just get on with it, Inspector."

"What we did was a miracle. Then Oshicora turned up, eight years ago, unseen amongst all the other refugees that were washing around the world. Marchenkho's *organitskaya* and every other criminal gang in the Metrozone has been losing ground to Oshicora's *yakuza* ever since."

"He's not *yakuza*," said Petrovitch. "His men have got too many fingers."

"Neo-yakuza, then. Corporate *samurai,* whatever you want to call them. They prey on us, suck us dry—virus and host. And if the infection was in just one place, it wouldn't matter, but Oshicora runs his organization like a franchise, each outlet selling his specific brand of criminality to the masses. They're turning up everywhere, and what we've worked for, what I've worked for, will have been for nothing. This city brought to its knees by a…" Words finally failed him. He threw up his hands and dropped heavily into his seat.

Petrovitch scratched his chin and pushed his glasses up his nose. "All that must make him very rich."

"Most people don't get it. They don't understand why the police just can't do something about it. I'm guessing that you get it perfectly."

"Better than you could possibly imagine." His coffee at a drinkable temperature, Petrovitch gulped at it until it was gone. "Thanks for the lecture, but I think I should be going."

His abruptness startled Chain. "You said you had nowhere to go."

"That's because I hadn't. Now I do." He was halfway to the door, when he realized he'd forgotten what he'd originally come for. "You still have something of mine."

"Ah, yes: your Remote Access Terminal. Half-gigabyte bandwidth, two-fifty-six-bit encryption, satellite connectivity and a touch interface. Chinese kit, top of the range, does pretty much everything. Just how does a kid like you afford something like that? More to the point, what would you need one for?"

"You're the detective. You figure it out." Petrovitch's jaw jutted out. "Just get it for me, okay?"

Chain patted his pockets, and ended up using the hardwired desk phone. He said a few words, listened to the response, and a faint smile raised the corners of his mouth.

He put the phone down. “Hard luck.”

“You’re joking.”

“I’m afraid not. Someone’s swiped it from the evidence room. I’ll be making inquiries, don’t worry. You’ll get it back, eventually.” Chain looked almost happy. “So where are you going, Petrovitch?”

“Do you honestly think I’d tell you? You can’t even keep evidence locked up. What good would you be with a secret?” Petrovitch wrestled with the unfamiliar door handle. “Just leave me alone.”

“You know my number. Call me when you’re ready.”

“Ready for what?” He finally got the door open.

“Ready for when you tell me why you saved Sonja Oshicora.”

“*Potselui mou zhopy,* Chain.”

Petrovitch fumed all the way down to the ground floor. He still had the sticky bug on the end of his fingers. He made a face at it, then carefully pasted it on the inside of his police-issue wrist tag. When he passed the front desk, he ripped the tag off and slapped it face-up on the counter in a carefully calculated act of rage.

Outside, he looked at the buildings around him and headed north. Toward Green Park.

8

The Oshicora Tower was constructed in the phallocentric style: tall, narrow at the base before flaring out to a maximum girth halfway up. Silvered triangles of glass wrapped like a staircase around its circumference, making it impossible to see any of the internal structure.

He'd soon have an opportunity. He was going in. He wasn't sure it was the wisest course to take, but he gauged that the short-term benefits of staying alive outweighed any potential downside. He stood almost exactly where he'd been that morning, watching Sonja Oshicora striding toward him—then hesitating, as if she couldn't quite remember what it was she planned to do next.

Then he turned and walked down the wide, fountain-flanked concourse to the entrance lobby. The guards—he'd have called them paycops, but for the little cloth Rising Sun badge sewn on the front of their impact armor—must have thought him a courier, because they stood back and ignored him.

Inside was bright and airy and clean. Real plants scrubbed the air, real people busied themselves cleaning the marble floor or carrying boxes labeled with *katakana* or answering phone calls at a tiered bank of terminals.

Petrovitch was the only non-Japanese face on the entire ground floor. He'd crossed the threshold from the multi-ethnic Metrozone to something he'd never encountered before; a monocultural enclave. He stood there, in the middle of the lobby, marveling at the strangeness of it all.

"Petrovitch-san?"

It took him a moment to realize there was someone behind him, and another to realize they were addressing him. He spun on his heel to see a squad of three black-clad guards, two standing respectfully behind their leader, who Petrovitch knew.

"Hijo. Hijo-san." He knew to bow, and Hijo bowed lower, revealing the ceremonial sword strapped across his back.

"You are most welcome, Petrovitch-san. Please, come with me." Hijo walked away, just expecting Petrovitch to follow, which after a deep breath, he did.

Everything he saw was beautiful, clean, new. It was how he'd imagined his future to be, not the squalor of the domiks, not the hot, heavy air that filled his lungs, not the day-to-day grind of just getting from one place to another. He had to keep reminding himself who he was going to see and how they got their money.

The lifts ran up the core of the building, accessed from behind the

receptionists with their terminals and headsets. Discreetly placed guards marked a line between the public space and the private—no physical barrier, but there was a steel strip set into the floor. Petrovitch had no doubt that he would have been challenged and turned back if he'd crossed it alone.

But he had his escort: Hijo in front of him and two more armored men behind. Their presence didn't make him feel any more safe than he did on the streets, and he knew they had orders to protect him.

One set of lift doors were being held open for him. Hijo marched straight in, turned, and waited.

Petrovitch hovered, and pushed at the bridge of his glasses. "Can I just say something here?"

"Of course, Petrovitch-san."

"My turning up here is in no way to be taken as a sign of loyalty or joining sides or looking for favors. I'd very much like to keep everything informal, no contract implied or offered, that sort of thing. All I'd like is a quick word with your boss and ask his help in clearing up a little misunderstanding, then I'll be out of here never to bother you again."

Hijo smiled, and gave a little bow. "Oshicora-san is eager to meet you, too."

Petrovitch screwed his eyes up and joined Hijo in the lift. "That's not quite what I meant, but never mind."

The two guards stayed outside, and bowed as the lift doors closed. Hijo spoke up—"*toppu yuka*"—and the car started smoothly. Lights indicating the floor number turned over, *kanji* characters all.

Petrovitch scratched his chin. The thought that had occurred to him while he listened to Chain crystallized in perfect form: this tower wasn't just Japanese owned, Japanese staffed, but was actually Japan. It went beyond a yearning for what was lost; it was no pale recreation of a Tokyo office block, but the real deal, vibrant and alive with industry.

Chain saw Oshicora's neo-*yakuza* as a new model of crime syndication, but he'd missed the truth of the matter. Petrovitch had misspent his youth playing strategy games: he recognized the plan for what it was. Each franchise was a colony, and they were growing.

The lift chimed, and the doors opened on another world.

The light was blinding and, for the first time in his life, Petrovitch realized he'd lived in the dark. He could hear water, birdsong, feel a cool breeze on his face. As his eyes adjusted, he began to see how all this was created at the top of a building in the middle of a city.

The glass skin of the tower soared up over his head. Fans at the apex stirred the air, sucking in the heat and pushing out a frigid wind. Trees, planted in real soil, waved their leaves over streams of moving

water that sometimes narrowed to run babbling over cobbles, sometimes widened to become slow pools dotted with lilies.

Gravel paths, carefully raked and rolled, wound across the rooftop until they arrived at graceful arched bridges. Birds—real birds—gave flashes of movement and color.

Almost hidden amongst all of the garden was a single man dressed in loose gray trousers and a rough white shirt. He was standing at the edge of a square of white sand in which large black stones had been carefully placed.

Hijo guided Petrovitch onto the first path, and took a step back. Hijo would see nothing, hear nothing, until it was time for him to go. Petrovitch walked as if he was on holy ground, carefully, fearfully, until he was within coughing distance of Oshicora.

The man looked around. “Come,” he said. “Closer.”

Petrovitch joined him at the dark timber which separated gravel from fine sand. He could see the surface of the sand was patterned in circles and waves.

“I owe you a great debt of gratitude, Samuil Petrovitch. You rescued my daughter from her attackers, at a considerable personal cost. A relieved parent thanks you from the bottom of his heart.” Oshicora bowed low and formally, showing his thinning hair. Then he straightened up. “You’ve heard stories about me? From Detective Inspector Chain?”

“One or two,” admitted Petrovitch.

“He makes me out to be a monster. Most unfair.” Oshicora spread his hands wide. “Could a monster have conceived all this?”

“It’s… amazing. You must regret not spending more time up here.”

“You mean, I am so busy running my empire of crime that I can snatch only brief moments of rest?” He laughed, loudly and freely, his head tipped back. “Really, there is not that much to do. The secret is to choose your key managers carefully. You only have to take the critical decisions, or at least those which your managers deem to be critical. I have plenty of time to devote to matters of culture and learning. Much like yourself.”

“That’s very kind,” said Petrovitch.

“You are downplaying your achievements, Petrovitch-san. You obtained a first-class honors degree from a top-rank university. You have a scholarship supplied by wise benefactors in Russia. Soon you will be Doctor Petrovitch, and you will become eminent in your chosen field. Good. It becomes everyone, great or lowly, to achieve their potential.” Oshicora rested his hand on his chin. “But you are wary of me, uncertain whether to accept a compliment in case it is snatched away and replaced with malice. Try not to fear me. Here we

are: a young man on the cusp of his life, an older man imagining what his legacy will be."

"Yeah. About that life: it's why I came to see you." Petrovitch turned his toe in the gravel. "Did you hear about Marchenkho?"

"I hear lots of rumors about that man."

"The contract? The two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-euro one on my head?"

Oshicora pretended to think for a moment. "I sent Hijo to the hospital to escort you to safety. He informed me you walked away."

"That'll be me not being in full command of the facts. I'll apologize to him later for his wasted journey. So I nearly ended up with a knife in my back today, and I'd rather not repeat the experience."

"You require my protection? It is yours."

"No," said Petrovitch slowly. "Not exactly."

"Perhaps we should take tea while you explain." Oshicora walked around the perimeter of the Zen garden and toward a small table set with a delicate white china tea service.

Petrovitch sat on the edge of his chair and gazed at Oshicora's deft movements setting out crockery and pouring fragrant green tea.

"It's like this," he said, cradling the tea bowl in both hands, "Chain has warned Marchenkho and his associates off by all but convincing him I'm not in your pay. The contract's been canceled, but it seems that Marchenkho isn't too bothered about letting everyone know. The last thing I need is for him to see me with one of your men. Or women; I'm sure it's all equal opportunities here. Even if they're brilliant, I'll still be marked for death and I'll still have to explain to my tutor why I have an armed bodyguard following me around."

Oshicora leaned over his bowl and bathed in the rising steam. "Most interesting analysis. Carry on."

"So what I'd like you to do is trump the original contract. Anyone who kills me gets taken down for say, five hundred thousand. It'll spread like wildfire to everyone who needs to know, and I can go to the corner shop again without worrying about snipers."

"What if," asked Oshicora, "Marchenkho has a change of heart, and bids higher?"

"You can always top him. That's why I came to you." Petrovitch blew across the surface of his tea, watching the patterns the steam made. "This is going to be a nine-day wonder. Next week, no one will care who I am. But for those few days I need the extra insurance."

"Ingenious. I'm impressed by your grasp of the intricacies of such a dark subject. It is almost," he mused, "as if you have some experience with the way these things are done."

"I grew up in St. Petersburg during Armageddon. Everybody there

has some relevant experience."

"Ah yes. You're not a native to these shores, much like me. You arrived here when?"

Petrovitch narrowed his eyes, squinting into the past. "Twenty twenty-one. I started at Imperial in twenty twenty-two."

"When you were nineteen?" Oshicora demonstrated his recall of incidental facts. "That seems a little young to tackle so difficult a subject."

"I'd passed the exams. Didn't seem much point in waiting till my balls dropped."

Oshicora laughed again, sending waves across his tea. "Good, good. Tell me; what's the next big thing in the world of physics? Do we have fusion power yet, or is it still ten years away?"

"Not if I have anything to do with it," said Petrovitch. "But showing it can work on a computer and building a reactor are two different things."

"And," said Oshicora, looking across the table at him, "any closer to a Grand Unified Theory?"

Petrovitch almost dropped his bowl, which probably gave the game away there and then. Hot tea poured into the palm of his hand as he regained his grip, almost causing him to fumble his catch. He gritted his teeth and put the bowl on the table.

"Your colleague, Doctor Ekanobi, has an announcement to make?" Oshicora handed him a starched napkin.

"Not just yet." Petrovitch took the cloth and held it inside his fist. "It might be nothing."

"On the other hand, it might be everything. Do you know how close other research groups are?"

"No. I'm not even formally part of the Imperial GUT group." The pain was fading now, and he inspected the damage. His hand was wetly pink, but there were no blisters or peeling skin. "More of a hanger-on. I help where I can."

"Stanford believe they are, at most, two or three steps away." Oshicora drank tea, and topped up Petrovitch's cup before continuing. "I believe it vital to keep up with these matters. Others are too short-sighted. Their loss. So, has there been a breakthrough?"

"It's not for me to say." He looked away, across the garden. The lift shaft was invisible. He was on a floating island in a sea of concrete and steel. "To be honest, I feel a bit uncomfortable talking about it."

"Of course. You have your professional confidences as I have mine. I apologize. But," said Oshicora, "perhaps we can discuss the practical implications of such a discovery. Unlimited power from zero point energy. Transmutation of elements. Space travel that is not just affordable, but fast. Access to the solar system, to other stars. What

else can you imagine for me?"

"The door to the universe is ajar," said Petrovitch, then shook his head as if he'd been in a dream. "Maybe in a hundred, a thousand years. Just because we know something is possible doesn't mean we can do it. Materials, equipment, gaps in our knowledge: anything might hold us up." He gave a wry smile. "Don't go to the bank just yet."

"Petrovitch-san. Finish your tea. There is something I would like to show you."

Nervously, Petrovitch finished the light green liquid in his refilled bowl and replaced it on the lacquered tray. Oshicora led him through the garden, over one of the bridges from where he could see the peaks of the central Metrozone skyscrapers around him and the slow, lazy motions of koi carp beneath his feet.

"Japanese companies have always looked ahead," said Oshicora. "Not a year, not five years. Not ten. They have business plans that stretch decades, a century or more. Now that we have no homeland, we must look even further."

A small shrine sat on a low mound in a dense grove of maple trees. The shrine was an ornate, curved roof resting on four carved pillars. Inside was a table, and at that table sat a man—a white man in a checkered shirt and fraying shorts. He was looking at a screen and typing on the tabletop, oblivious to their approach.

They walked up steps to the platform. The boards creaked, and the seated man's eyes flickered to capture their image before turning their full attention back to the screen.

The screen was dense with code, which he was splicing together with reckless confidence.

"Petrovitch-san, may I introduce Martin Sorenson? He is helping me build the future."

9

Sorenson unfolded himself from his chair. He extended a shovel-like hand and grasped Petrovitch's in a knuckle-cracking hold.

"Pleased to meet you," he said in an inflected Midwest accent.

"You're…" Petrovitch bit his tongue and changed gear. Sorenson knew he was an American, and Petrovitch telling him so would only mark him out as socially inept. "Very busy."

"Mr. Oshicora pays well for good work. You doing the project too?"

"Project?" He didn't know what the project was. "No."

Oshicora interrupted. "Petrovitch-san has been assisting me in another matter, where he has been most helpful. Sorenson is an expert in man–machine interfaces; his skills are most apposite."

Now Petrovitch wondered what Oshicora needed a cyberneticist for. "I thought you Americans were into gene splicing and wetware."

"I'm the exception to the rule, then, Mr. Petrovitch." Sorenson scratched at his thinning sandy hair, looking more like a farmer worrying about his crop than a technologist. He reached into his back pocket and passed him a business card. "If you ever need a spare part, just call."

Petrovitch glanced across to Oshicora, whose face remained utterly unreadable. "Yeah, thanks," he said, sliding the card into his jacket. "If you ever need, I don't know, someone to design some building-sized electromagnets, I'm your man. Though I doubt there's much call for that sort of thing in your line of work."

Sorenson laughed and clapped Petrovitch on the shoulder. "You never know."

He forced his arm back into line. "What was it you wanted me to see, Oshicora-san?"

"If Mister Sorenson will close his work, I will show you."

Sorenson busied himself at the virtual keyboard, then moved out of Oshicora's way.

The older man tugged his sleeves away from his wrists and reset the terminal's language. The image of the keyboard changed and grew as it converted to use an extended Japanese character set. He typed in a single command line, and sat back.

The screen blinked, as if it were a giant eye. When it opened, it looked out on an aerial view of Japan.

"Here is *Nippon,* as it was on the evening of March twenty-eighth, twenty seventeen," said Oshicora. He touched the screen, and they descended through the clouds until they were over the island of Honshu. "Here is Tokyo."

The city sprawled around the bay, street after street. Piers jutted into the sea. Buildings rose up from the ground. Oshicora brought them down to pavement level, where the scene slowly rotated. Shops, brightly lit, filled with the goods of the world. Everything was as it had been, the day before the whole island chain started to turn into Atlantis. Everything, except the people.

"I get it," said Petrovitch. "How detailed are you going to make this?"

"Perfectly so. Down to the feel of the silk on a kimono."

"That's ambitious. No wonder you need Sorenson. You want a totally immersive city."

"I beg to correct you, Petrovitch-san. A whole country. Every tree, every blade of grass, every grain of sand. Mapped and reproduced from the memories of one hundred and twenty million Japanese survivors. Not just houses, but everything in them. Not just parks, but the scent of chrysanthemums. Cherry blossom will fall like rain once more. It will be exact. Our homeland will rise from the sea as if it had never fallen. The *shinkansen* will run again."

Petrovitch wondered if his heart had skipped a beat. "*Nu ti dajosh!* What the hell are you running this on?"

"Below this building is a room. It is bombproof, fireproof, waterproof, electromagnetic and radiation hard. In it is a quantum computer. If every *nikkeijin* visited the simulation at the same time, it would still run flawlessly."

"Ooh." Petrovitch's fingers tingled. He started to think about all the things he could do with such massively parallel processing, and broke out in a cold sweat.

"Petrovitch-san? Are you unwell?"

"No, I'm fine." He rested his hands on the table. "Just taking a moment. That's really very impressive."

"I am happy. Now, I will leave you briefly in the care of Sorenson, while I attend to the other matter we discussed earlier. If you will excuse me?" Oshicora bowed and left the shrine, leaving the single chair unoccupied.

"Mind if I?" asked Petrovitch.

"Knock yourself out, kid," said Sorenson. "So what do you make of our employer?"

"He's not my employer," said Petrovitch firmly, searching for the toggle that would give him a standard Roman keyboard. "I sort of bumped into his daughter this morning."

"Sonja: I've seen her around, though I've been told not to talk to her. But I haven't seen a wife, and he doesn't wear a ring." Sorenson looked around to see if he could be overheard. "Not that you have to be married to have kids. Not over here, anyways."

“And how is the Reconstruction?” Petrovitch gave up, and used the touchscreen instead, navigating around the streets. The walls were solid. Doors were tabbed to open. When he ran a virtual hand over a clothes rail, the dresses moved in exquisite detail.

“You one of these people who expect every American to be a card-carrying Reconstructionist? That gets old real quick.”

“No. I rather assumed you weren’t one of them, since you’re working for Oshicora.”

“It’s a few weeks” consultancy, nothing more.” Sorenson dug his hands in his pockets. “What do you mean? What’s wrong with working for Old Man Oshicora? Because he’s a Jap?”

“Not at all.” Petrovitch glanced over the top of his glasses. “Because he controls the fastest-growing criminal organization in the Metrozone.”

“He what?”

Petrovitch raised his eyebrows. “You didn’t know? Oh dear.”

“Hey now, wait just a…” Sorenson chuckled. “Funny, kid. You had me going for a minute.”

“Sorenson,” said Petrovitch, “it’s not a joke. That ‘other matter’ that Oshicora’s gone to see about is to save me from being shot by the Ukrainian *zhopu* who tried to kidnap his daughter this morning. I’m not here for any other reason but to try and keep my skin intact.”

A look of doubt flickered across Sorenson’s broad face. “Kid,” he started.

“And stop calling me kid. ‘Kid’ would describe the girl who tried to drive a perspex pick into my guts on the tube.”

“Okay, Petrovitch. I don’t know where you’re getting your facts from, but this gig is legit.” Sorenson was growing angry. Petrovitch could see the storm start to rise behind his eyes. “Just butt out of my business. What is this? Revenge for the Cold War?”

“Neither of us was alive for that.” Petrovitch turned his attention back to the screen. “What you do with the information is up to you. Don’t blame the messenger.” He deliberately leaned forward and absorbed the sights of the eerily empty city.

“I don’t have to take this.” Sorenson stood behind the screen. “I don’t even know you.”

“Yeah, look.” Despite his desire to keep on playing the man, Petrovitch was aware that Sorenson could not only beat the *govno* out of him, but seemed quite willing to do so. “I don’t care. You’re not interested in anything I have to say because it’s me saying it. So I’m going to do the grown-up thing and let you get on with your coding.”

He got up and walked away, letting the chair fall back with a bang onto the wooden boards. But he didn’t know how far he was permitted to go in the park, so he sat down on the shrine’s wide

bottom step and waited.

The chair scraped as it was set upright. “Who’s your source?”

Without turning around, Petrovitch said: “You seem bright enough. Work it out yourself.”

“Okay. I’m sorry. Tell me who I need to talk to.” Sorenson sat down next to him, and had the grace to look troubled.

“DI Chain. Works out of Buckingham Gate.” He looked up and saw Oshicora making his stately way toward them. He finished in a hurried whisper: “Do not mention my name. I’ve no intention of renewing my acquaintance with the man.”

Petrovitch scrabbled to his feet and went to meet Oshicora on the apex of the wooden bridge.

“Petrovitch-san,” said Oshicora, bowing.

Petrovitch bowed in return.

“I have made the arrangements you requested. A counter-contract of five hundred thousand euros has been placed. I imagine you will be safe even from Marchenkho himself.” He looked inordinately pleased with himself, getting one over on an old rival.

“Thank you, Oshicora-san. I kind of assume that our paths won’t cross again.” Petrovitch chanced a half-smile. “I’m rather hoping they won’t. I like a quiet life.”

“Stranger things have been known to happen. If you find that your life is not as quiet as you wish, I will instruct my staff to come to your assistance, as you did to my daughter’s. If you call, they will come.” Oshicora contemplated the carp moving in circles beneath his feet. He dipped his fingers in his pocket and came out with a few compressed pellets of fish food. He dropped them one at a time into the water, and the fish fought for the honor of eating.

“Thank you also for showing me this garden, and your quantum computer project. I hadn’t known there were any in private hands. I wouldn’t be so unwise as to spread that around, either.”

“We understand each other perfectly, Petrovitch-san. Come; I will take you to Hijo, who will show you out.”

As they walked, Petrovitch glanced behind him at Sorenson, standing by the shrine, fists clearly clenching and unclenching. “I think you should have told him.”

“Told him? Ah, yes. Sorenson. You believe I have ruined his life?”

“I think you might have given him the choice first.”

“Do not waste your sympathy on him,” said Oshicora. “He appears to be what the Yankees call a hick, but he has a past which he manages to hide from his own Homeland Security, from himself even. I, however, believe I have discovered his secret. That aside, the mere fact of his relationship with me will ruin him when he has completed his work and tries to return home. It is good that he suspects nothing;

it will be an unpleasant surprise for him."

Petrovitch nodded, and managed somehow not to swear out loud.

Oshicora appeared not to notice the abrupt whiteness of Petrovitch's skin, and he carried on. "One word from me, and he will lose his citizenship, his company, his assets. He will be stateless, a refugee like we once were. You, I will deal with honorably. After the way the Americans treated my countrymen and women, I have no compunction in exploiting any one of them mercilessly."

"Yeah, well." They were at the lift again. Hijo was as immobile as when Petrovitch had left him. "Thanks again, and goodbye."

"Goodbye, Petrovitch-san. I wish you good fortune and success in your studies. The secrets of the universe are elusive, but perhaps you are the man to catch them." Oshicora turned to Hijo, who bowed low. "Petrovitch-san is leaving us now. Please make certain he arrives home safely."

The last sight of Oshicora that Petrovitch had was his smiling face being narrowed to a line by the closing doors.

Hijo led him back through the sea of Japanese faces to the lobby, but didn't leave him there. Instead, they went through a side door and down a spiraling ramp to an underground loading bay. Sharp white light lit up a pillar-supported concrete chamber. A car sat silently, waiting for them.

It was big and black and crouched low on its suspension. Polarized glass rendered its windows opaque. Petrovitch wondered if there was anyone in it—whether or not it was completely automatic—when the rear door rolled aside electrically and the courtesy light came on.

"Please, Petrovitch-san." Hijo gestured to the open door, and Petrovitch climbed in. He'd been wrong. There was a driver, and someone riding shotgun. Then Hijo himself got in beside him and tapped the shoulder of the man behind the wheel.

"I didn't realize you were coming with me," said Petrovitch. He was eager to be away; he didn't trust Sorenson to keep his mouth shut.

Hijo pulled the seatbelt across his body and clicked it into place. "My employer would be most displeased with me if something happened to you while you were in our care," he said by way of explanation.

"So I get a ride in a bullet-proof car." Petrovitch took a deep breath, and followed Hijo's example with the seatbelt. "Does this thing go south of the river?"

Barely aware that the engine was running, Petrovitch felt the car ease forward toward a steel shutter that rolled upward. They were outside in a recessed road that gradually rose to join another. He

twisted in his seat: he could see the base of the Oshicora Tower behind him, but not its top. They turned, and he lost even that view.

He was driven down the Strand, and across Waterloo Bridge, which neatly skirted the parliamentary Green Zone, then back west along the river before heading south. He even caught sight of the old Palace of Westminster brooding, black and cold, behind concrete walls.

The driver's wraparound sunglasses showed him which way to go, and Petrovitch became a mute passenger until he felt he was back on his own territory.

"If you drop me here, that'll be fine. I want to get a coffee." They knew where he lived, but he didn't have to take them to his door.

Hijo tapped the driver again, and the car pulled up next to the curb nearest Wong's.

"*Chyort!*"

"Sorry, Petrovitch-san?"

Petrovitch pressed his fingers into his temples. "This morning, I had a brand new Random Access Terminal delivered. Detective Inspector Chain took it in for questioning, and it vanished from the evidence room. Your lot didn't have anything to do with that, did they?"

"I believe not, but I will ask. Should I return it to you if we have it?"

"Bring it here," he said, "Wong will look after it for me. No offense, but the less I get seen in your company, the better."

"As you wish, Petrovitch-san." Hijo slipped his seatbelt and opened the door. He got out first for a precautionary look around, before allowing Petrovitch to step out onto the litter-strewn pavement.

They were attracting more than a little attention, not least from Wong who was at his shop door with his arms folded disapprovingly.

"Right then," said Petrovitch. "*Dobre den.*"

"Please," said Hijo, "I would like to know: why did you help Miss Sonja?"

Petrovitch could already taste coffee in his mouth, bittersweet and strong. "Tell you what, Hijo," he said, pushing his glasses back up his nose, "I'll answer that if you tell me what the *yebat* she was doing out on her own."

Hijo looked like he'd just been slapped.

"Yeah. Thought so," said Petrovitch, and shouldered his way past Wong in search of an empty table, cries of what a bad man he was ringing in his ears.

10

He woke up, but this time not to the sounds of the streets and windmills and voices. Someone was hammering on his door with something hard and heavy.

The door was steel, reinforced with electrically operated bolts. No need to panic, he lied to himself even as ice water flooded his veins and his poor heart struggled to keep in time.

He grabbed his glasses from where he'd thrown them the night before and listened carefully. The banging wasn't the right rhythm for breaking in—he'd expect a slow, heavy concussion with sledgehammer or a ram. Neither was it someone with more technical expertise and a gas axe or plastique; he'd have woken with the room full of smoke and a masked man standing over him with a gun.

Petrovitch pulled on the death metal T-shirt from the day before and stood close to the door. Through the insulation he could just about hear his name being shouted out.

Bangbangbangbang. Petrovitch. Bangbangbangbang.

"*Ahueyet?* You *opezdol,* you *raspizdyai!* Go away," he called back, but the banging and shouting redoubled.

He pulled the first bolt, then the second, working his way around the door. Finally, he gripped the handle and pulled.

Sorenson stumbled in, shoe in hand. Petrovitch shoved him hard toward the far wall and glanced outside. Everyone there was staring at him. He let fly with *yob materi vashi* and slammed the door shut again.

"What the *chyort* are you doing here?"

Sorenson stared at him wild-eyed. He was in the same clothes—shirt and shorts—that he'd worn yesterday, and Petrovitch guessed that he'd not been back to his hotel at all.

"You were right," he muttered. "So now I need your help."

"You want what?" said Petrovitch. He reached for his trousers and dragged them on. "Why do you think I'd be either willing or able to help you? And how the *huy* did you get my address?"

Sorenson walked toward the chair and looked like he was about to sit down.

"No. You're not staying." Petrovitch jammed his feet into his boots and started to lace them with controlled savagery. "Who told you where I live?"

"Chain." Sorenson stuck his hands in his back pockets. "I went to see him."

"And you just happened to mention my name. Thanks, *pidaras!*"

"He wouldn't give me anything otherwise. Then he said he'd arrest me for money laundering if I took so much as one red cent off

Oshicora. So I've come to you: we've got some planning to do."

"We?" Petrovitch threw on his jacket and his courier bag. "Let me say this in words even you might understand: I wouldn't plan so much as a piss-up in a brewery with you because you're a fucking idiot."

Sorenson winced.

"What? Your little Reconstructionist soul shrinking at the bad language the nasty Russian is using? Get used to it, because you'll be hearing plenty more." He stamped to the door. "Get your shoe on, you *raspizdyai kolhoznii*. Now tell me you have money."

"I've money." Sorenson dropped his shoe and shuffled his foot into it.

"Good. Now get going: you're buying breakfast." Petrovitch hauled his door open, shoved Sorenson out into the corridor and heaved the door shut. He waited for the bolts to clang back into place, before blazing a trail down toward the first stairwell.

Eventually, Sorenson caught up. "Petrovitch, what is this place?"

"Domiks, after the shipping containers used to build them. It's where refugees like me live."

"I thought you were a student."

"Doesn't mean I'm not a refugee. Now," said Petrovitch, shouldering a fire door, "straight to the bottom, and if you value what's left of your life, don't look at anyone."

"I made it up here all right." Sorenson blustered.

"All it means is that they're waiting for you on the way down. Go, and keep your mouth shut. Yankees aren't exactly flavor of the month."

They walked the long, lonely staircase all the way to the ground floor. Petrovitch considered them lucky to arrive unmolested; perhaps Sorenson's minimal dress and his aura of impotent rage made it appear that the American had already been mugged.

"Where are we going?" Sorenson blinked in the morning light and hugged himself.

"I told you. Breakfast."

They crossed at the lights and crashed through Wong's sticky door.

"Hey, Petrovitch. You still owe me for yesterday." Wong flicked a filthy tea towel at him.

"Yeah. Don't worry. The Yank's paying. Two full breakfasts, and coffee, strong as you like."

Wong folded his arms and regarded Sorenson. "Who this?"

"Just one of my *yakuza* friends. So, when you're ready with the coffee?"

"It not enough that you bad man: you now hang out with bad men. Big cars, guns, money. It ends in early grave." He dragged his

finger across his throat.

They looked at each other across the counter, Wong swapping his attention between Petrovitch and Sorenson.

"Breakfast?" ventured Petrovitch. "Or should we go elsewhere?"

"Show me the money," said Wong.

"Show him the money, Sorenson."

"What? I guess." He dug in his pocket for his credit chip and handed it to Wong, who fed it into the reader.

His thunderous expression lightened a little. "Okay, you sit down. No organizing crime in my shop."

"Wouldn't dream of it." Petrovitch kicked Sorenson over to the corner table, and chose to sit with his back against the wall and a good view of the door. "Sit your ass down. We've got some serious eating to do."

Sorenson cast a suspicious glance over to the counter where his credit chip remained in the till. "I still don't understand what we're doing here."

"Look. You've been up all night, walking the streets—and God only knows how you survived that—and have been running on nervous energy since you realized just how catastrophic the mistake you made is. We're going to load up on caffeine and long-chain carbohydrates, then I'm going to beat you around the head until your brain restarts. Yeah?"

Sorenson stared at him.

"How old are you?" asked Petrovitch. He swept the tabletop with the palm of his hand and decrumbed it against his thigh. Wong banged down two mugs of coffee and rumbled deep in his throat. "Thanks, Wong. Really, you don't want to overhear any of this."

He walked away muttering about bad men.

"Thirty-six," said Sorenson.

"You've been through the draft, yeah?"

"Sure, I served my country. Corps of Engineers. Five years. I made sergeant and got me a chestful of medals, including two Purple Hearts."

Petrovitch leaned back. "Then grow a pair of *yajtza*, man."

"Okay, so I screwed up taking work from Oshicora. Chain has given me one chance to put it right, and you're going to help me." Sorenson snagged his coffee and drank. Whatever he was expecting, it wasn't the scalding black slurry that sloshed around his mouth. His eyes bugged, his cheeks bulged, but he eventually swallowed. "That's…"

"That's what you'll be drinking at least two cups of, so get used to it." Petrovitch picked up his own mug and drank nonchalantly. "So you did a deal with Chain. You told him you'd get something on

Oshicora in return for a clean getaway."

"I can take my lumps, kid. But it's not just me. It's my mother and my sister. They rely on my company for everything. If it goes under, they lose the roof over their heads."

"If the stakes were so high, why didn't you check who Oshicora was?"

"I don't know. I'm on a sales trip, visiting hospitals and pitching my implants. I get approached by that Hijo character. His employer would like to meet me, discuss a project he's working on. I say Okay, because, hey, I'm on a sales trip. I'm here to drum up business."

"Don't tell me: you got so caught up in the idea of VirtualJapan that you let your guard down." The first hint of sympathy entered Petrovitch's voice. "He plucked you like a ripe apple."

"He's got his own quantum computer, damn it. I never thought for a moment." Sorenson ran his hand through his greasy hair. "That was my problem: I never thought."

"Did you not even find it slightly odd that a Japanese businessman was offering an American businessman a job?"

"I…"

"Do you not realize how much they hate you? All of you?"

"I, no. I guess I didn't. I didn't approve of the President's decision. I don't even vote Reconstruction." Sorenson sighed and started on his coffee in earnest, pulling a face every time.

"You should have made that clear to him. Oshicora's lumped you in with the perpetual President Mackenzie and all the other Reconstructionists. As far as he's concerned, you're the public face of a policy that would have condemned him and one hundred and twenty million of his fellow citizens to a watery grave." Petrovitch looked up, and Wong was advancing on them with two plates piled high with heart-stopping amounts of fried food. "Incoming."

They sat back in their seats as Wong banged their breakfasts down. The proprietor glared at the two men, then turned his back on them.

Sorenson blinked like an owl. "What… is this?"

"It's better not to ask. Very little of it has ever seen the inside of an animal, and most of the rest hasn't been grown in soil." Petrovitch leaned over and snagged a bottle of ketchup from a neighboring table. "It's full of salt, fat, starch and protein, and honestly, it's the best thing you can eat right now."

"But my heart!"

"You should worry," he said, brandishing his knife and fork. "Sorenson, just stop your complaining and get it inside you."

The pair worked their way methodically through the bacon shapes, sausage shapes, potato shapes, reconstituted egg, and

engineered beans. Petrovitch speared Sorenson's black pudding after explaining precisely how it was made; the irony being it was the only natural product on the plate.

They washed it down with more of Wong's oil-black brew.

"Ready to talk?" said Petrovitch.

"Guess so." Sorenson covered his mouth to stifle a burp.

"Right. So let's get the story so far: you're a regular straight up sort of guy, look after your sister and your mother, done nothing illegal so far."

Sorenson's eyes twitched briefly. "That's right," he said.

"You wouldn't be holding out on me, would you?" Petrovitch pushed his glasses up his nose. "Think very carefully before answering."

"There's nothing."

"I can find out for myself." He sighed. "I could probably find out right now if I had my rat. Forget it. Why do you think I can do something about this?"

"I saw you with Oshicora. You've got leverage with him. You can use that."

"I'm not crossing him. No way, never."

"You're the only one I've ever seen him with who he actually respects. He puts his guard down with you."

"Even if that was true…" Petrovitch chewed his lip. "No. Absolutely not. I already had one gang trying to kill me this week. Why would I want another?"

Sorenson picked his knife up and stared at the grease-stained end. "Is that your final answer?"

"Look, I already tried, okay? I talked to him. I told him that he was treating you badly."

"And what did he say?"

"That it was no more than you deserved because you're a stinking Yankee technocrat who did nothing while Japan drowned." Petrovitch glanced up at the American's flushed face and decided not to mention that Oshicora knew what it was he was hiding. "I chose not to push it. The only thing you can do is go back to work. Back to the Oshicora Tower and pray to whatever god you believe in that when you're done, you get shown some mercy."

"Chain will ruin me."

"Trust me, Oshicora will ruin you a whole lot faster. Buy yourself some time to come up with a better plan."

Sorenson leaped up and closed his hands on the tabletop, threatening to snap it in two. "I came to you for help."

"Chain told you to. He's using you as much as Oshicora is. All I am is a kid who knows a lot about maths and physics. How the *chyort*

did anyone think I could help?" Petrovitch finished his coffee standing.

Sorenson kicked his own chair away in frustration.

"Hey," shouted Wong. "You stop that now."

Petrovitch bent down and picked the chair up. "He's leaving. So am I."

Wong threw Sorenson's credit chip toward them. Petrovitch snatched at it and missed. Sorenson's catch was more certain.

"Come on, before you get me barred." Petrovitch squeezed out onto the busy street, and Sorenson joined him, shivering slightly in the damp morning air. Despite the American's size, he looked small and pathetic at that moment. "Go back to your hotel. Get a shower, change your clothes. Then go to work. Go, Sorenson, just go."

A black car with darkened windows pulled up by the curb; a door opened but no one emerged. Immediately Petrovitch was looking for a way out, but it was too late.

"Comrade Marchenkho would like a word." The man had stepped from behind him and pressed something hard into his back, pushing him toward the open door.

Sorenson looked ready for a fight. Petrovitch put a hand out and covered his fist, then gave a little sigh.

"Stop stroking your *yielda,*" he told the gunman. "You're not going to use it on me. Unless you want a half-a-million-euro contract on you."

"That might be true." The object left his skin and Petrovitch saw Sorenson pale. "But your friend, on the other hand, has no such protection. Get in the car."

Petrovitch looked up at the gray sky and gave a small strangled cry.

11

The inside of the car smelled of stale vodka and sweat, and Petrovitch immediately thought of home. The Ukrainian gunman sat next to Sorenson, automatic jammed against his ribs.

"You know, it doesn't get much better than this," said Petrovitch.

"Shut up, Petrovitch," said Sorenson.

"Yeah, well. Hey, Yuri."

The Ukrainian leaned forward. "It's Grigori."

"To be fair, I'm not that bothered what you're called. Marchenkho's chancing his arm, and by extension, yours. Feel free to let us out any time."

"Your American friend has got the right idea; shut up."

"Why don't you bite me, *zhirniy pidaras?*"

The foot soldier stiffened, and Sorenson winced as the barrel of the gun drove deeper.

"Well, excuse my mouth." Petrovitch put his feet up against the back of the front seat. "It doesn't give me much confidence in your boss if his underlings lose it when I've called them a rude name."

"Petrovitch…"

He dismissed Marchenkho's whole gang with a gesture. "Yeah, I'm done talking to the monkeys. Get me the organ grinder."

The driver took them north and east, eventually crossing the Thames at Southwark. The old East End was a vast building site, with property demolished as fast as it was being erected—the curious consequence being that there was nothing finished and all that existed were streets of scaffolding and cranes.

The car pulled into one of the construction yards, busy with laborers and machines, and came to a halt outside a pile of domik containers. External steps bolted onto the outside serviced the doors cut into the steel sides. At the very top of the staircase stood a man in a heavy coat and a fur hat.

When he saw Petrovitch get out and look up, he stared for a moment before disappearing into the domik behind him.

Sorenson clambered out, and Petrovitch seized the brief opportunity: he bent forward on the pretext of helping the American, and whispered: "Say nothing."

"Noth… ow." Sorenson was left rubbing his shin.

The Ukrainian looked up from inside the car, no longer bothering to hide his gun—home turf for him. "What?"

"Nothing," said Petrovitch pointedly, and jerked his head in the direction of the domiks. "Up there?"

"No funny business." Grigori shepherded them to the foot of the

stairs and indicated that Petrovitch should go first.

Petrovitch sarcastically mouthed “no funny business” to himself. “You’ve watched too many Hollywood films, *tovarisch,* unless Marchenkho’s hiring straight from central casting. Let’s get this over with.”

He clanged his way up the steps and, despite himself, was tired and sweaty when he reached the top. He entered without knocking and found himself in a passable replica of a seventies-style Soviet apartment.

An ancient three-bar electric fire sat in the ersatz hearth, and a framed picture of the great bear, Josef Stalin, hung above the mantelpiece.

Marchenkho sat at the dark wood desk, stroking his luxurious mustache. He’d lost the hat and the coat, and revealed a commissar’s uniform, an enamel red star pinned to his olive-green lapel.

“Sit,” said Marchenkho.

There was one chair, and Petrovitch took it. They sat in silence as Sorenson and Grigori came in, and the door banged hollowly closed.

After an age, Marchenkho pulled a drawer open, and pulled out a bottle of vodka. He went back for three shot glasses, then unscrewed the bottle and dashed out a measure for him and his guests. Spilled spirit started to etch the varnish away and evaporate into the air.

“Nice set-up,” said Petrovitch. “Not quite Oshicora’s standard, but at least you’ve only fallen this far.”

Marchenkho dipped his hand in the drawer a third time and laid a Glock on the rectangle of leather set into the desk top. He took one of the vodka glasses for himself, and pushed the other two on cushions of liquid toward Petrovitch and Sorenson.

Petrovitch passed Sorenson his, and looked Marchenkho square in the eye as they both flipped their wrists and swallowed hard. They slammed the empty glasses down on the desk within moments of each other.

“ ‘s’okay.”

Marchenkho sloshed more vodka into their glasses. “Your American friend seems less sure.”

“Reconstruction has made him soft.”

“We have to look elsewhere for worthy adversaries.” Marchenkho ran his fingers across his mustache again. “And elsewhere for loyal partners.”

“Yeah. About that.” Petrovitch glanced round at Sorenson, who was still trying to brace himself to drink, the brimming glass hovering at his lips. He shook his head in disgust. “The Oshicora girl was an accident.”

“A very fortunate accident for her. Less fortunate for me. And I

am still very unhappy with you." Marchenkho pointedly looked at the Glock rather than Petrovitch. "You cost me, boy. Cost me dear."

"Maybe you should have had a better plan."

"You need to be careful how you speak to me."

"Bite me." Petrovitch leaned forward for his vodka, then crossed his ankles and propped his feet up on the edge of the desk. "Any plan that could be thwarted by a kid just wandering past was *govno*. If that was the height of your capabilities, you're screwed."

Marchenkho blushed red with fury and snatched his Glock off the table. He pointed it in Petrovitch's face. Sorenson took a step forward, but Grigori was already there, gun at the American's neck.

"You little…" said Marchenkho.

"*A huy li?*" Petrovitch slugged back the vodka and threw the glass onto the table. "You're the past. Oshicora's the future. How do I know this? Because even you won't kill me. Pull the trigger and Oshicora will destroy you," he said. "What little you have left will be taken from you."

"Why did you do it? Why? My one opportunity to beat him and you ruined it." Marchenkho was raving, spittle flying through the air from the foam at the corners of his mouth. "What's he paying you? I'll double it. I'll triple it. Just tell me why!"

"Fine." Petrovitch dragged his legs aside and slapped both his palms down on the tabletop. The vodka bottle jumped. "You want to know why I did it? Kindness. That's why I did it. Because I was being kind. Just once. Just to show the world that a complete bastard like me still has a shred of human decency left inside."

The gangster's jaw worked as if he was trying to gag down something so wholly unpalatable that it stuck in his throat.

"You don't like that, do you?" crowed Petrovitch. "You don't understand it. It doesn't compute. Maybe you'll understand this: *eede vhad e sgadie kak malinkey suka!*"

Marchenkho swept the tabletop clean with one movement. Everything crashed to the floor—desk set, photo frame, paperweight, bottle, shot glasses. The air thickened with alcohol fumes.

"I should kill you now, and to hell with the consequences."

"All half a million euros of consequences? You haven't got the *yajtza*." Petrovitch sat back and folded his arms.

Marchenkho started to smile, his mustache twitching. Eventually, he was helpless, roaring with laughter, tears streaming down his face. The gun slapped back down on the table, and Marchenkho fell wheezing and gasping into his chair.

"Are we done now?" asked Petrovitch.

Marchenkho wiped his eyes with his sleeve. "You: a few more like you and the Soviet Union would never have fallen." He looked past

him to Sorenson. “Kill the American instead,” he told Grigori.

A foot in Sorenson’s back sent him sprawling. He made it to all fours, quickly for a big man, before he felt the gun at the back of his head. He froze, staring up at Petrovitch, who adjusted his glasses and leaned back even further.

“Yeah, you could do that. But what you should get through your radiation-addled skull is that if you hurt Sorenson in any way, he can’t fit me with my new heart. I’d die, and you’d be back to worrying about those little laser dots bouncing all over your chest. What do you reckon, Yuri? Shall we see how keen you are to follow your boss’s orders?”

They all waited on Marchenkho, who eventually said in a quiet voice. “Get out.”

“Good call.” Petrovitch reached down to help Sorenson back to his feet, then levered himself upright. “I’d like to say it was a pleasure meeting you—but I can’t. I had loads of important stuff to do this morning and you’ve gone and ruined it all.”

“Get out now.”

Sorenson took hold of Petrovitch’s arm and steered him irresistibly to the door. He almost wrenched the handle off in his haste to leave. When he’d finally got him outside, he turned on him.

“Say nothing, you said! You nearly got both of us killed, you lunatic.”

“I nearly got you killed? I saved your life, farmboy, and don’t you forget it.” Petrovitch started down the staircase. “And we wouldn’t have been in this position if you hadn’t come banging on my door this morning.”

“I could have bargained with him. We could have got Oshicora together.”

“You want to work with Marchenkho? Be my guest. He ordered you dead on a whim not sixty seconds ago.” He was a whole landing away. “Go on. Go back. See how long you last, you *zhopa*.”

“Is it true about your heart?” called Sorenson.

“Yeah. Now, come on. I’m taking you back to Oshicora, then I’m going to wash my hands of this whole stupid *pizdets*.” He waited for him to catch up, then negotiated his way around the pallets of building materials lying between him and the front gate.

Sorenson fell in beside him. “So it was just a coincidence: my business, your heart?”

“Yeah.”

“Lucky. Lucky for me.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you really need a new heart?”

“What is this? Twenty questions?” Petrovitch scowled up at

Sorenson. “Give me an ulcer as well, why don’t you?”

Sorenson dug his hands in his back pockets. “I can get you a new heart.”

“I don’t need your help. I’m not owing you anything.”

“New hearts are pricey. I can do it for cost.” Petrovitch didn’t respond. “Discount, then.”

“I don’t need your help,” he repeated.

“Where are you going to get that sort of money?” Sorenson suddenly threw his head back and gave a cry of triumph. “That’s why! Oshicora’s daughter for a new, top-of-the-range heart. Tell you what—I’ll do it for nothing. Donate the heart, pay for the surgery.”

“*Perestan bit dabayobom*.”

“I wish I knew what you were saying.”

“No you don’t. Really, you don’t. Your ears would melt.” Petrovitch stood on the curb and tried to orient himself. He turned north. “This way.”

“I’m just saying it was smart thinking. I can trump that, though.”

“You will not buy me, Sorenson, just in the same way that Oshicora won’t buy me either. Now, please, just shut up and walk.”

“But where are you going to find that sort of money?”

“You know, I should have let Marchenkho shoot you. It would have been quieter.” Petrovitch walked away, and after a few moments of indignation, Sorenson followed.

As they walked away from the empty East End toward the heights of Stepney, the pavements slowly filled up until it was as dense with people as it was in the center of the city. Petrovitch slipped between the bodies with practiced ease, leaving Sorenson to crash into everyone and spend his entire journey apologizing.

Whitechapel was the closest tube station: when Petrovitch turned around at the entrance, he found that Sorenson was still dogging his steps.

“Where are we going?” He was breathless, sore, and looked ridiculous in his shirt and shorts.

“Your hotel,” said Petrovitch. “What’s it called?”

“The Waldorf Hilton. You know it?”

“Yeah, I go to the tea dances every week. District Line to Temple. Go and get a ticket and meet me on the other side of the screen.”

Sorenson stepped closer as people streamed by, in and out of the station. They were in the lee of one of the pillars, a tiny island of stillness.

“I’m sorry,” he started to say.

“Good. You should be. Thank whichever god you pray to that Marchenkho is a *skatina* who wouldn’t know the truth if it gave him a *minyet*.” Petrovitch sighed, and let his shoulders sag. “I didn’t ask for

any of this. I really did just want to help her. Do the right thing for once. And now look: I could die any moment, and it's either an assassin or my heart. I've got things to do, things that I can only do alive. The mysteries of creation don't discover themselves."

"I said I was sorry."

"And I said I won't help you. I won't help you, or Chain, or Marchenkho, or any combination of you, do anything to the Oshicoras. Got it?"

"I get it." Sorenson felt in his pocket for his credit chip. "But I don't buy your story about the Oshicora girl. Where else would someone like you get the money for an implant?"

"Yeah, well. I'm going organic." Petrovitch assumed his usual shrug.

Sorenson breathed in sharply. "How the hell…?"

"None of your business," said Petrovitch, and stepped out into the concourse where he let himself be swept away.

12

They were walking down the street in front of the Oshicora Tower. Sorenson had showered, changed, and set his face hard.

"I'll find some way to get me out of this."

"Whatever *pizdets* you're in is only going to get worse if you fight against Oshicora. He'll flay you alive if you cross him." Petrovitch looked up to the pinnacle of the glass dome; the park was lost behind the reflection of the sky. "If you serve loyally, he'll be more merciful than if you get antsy about it. You're nearly done, right?"

"Another day, or two. Debugging the beta version. I've never run it on a quantum platform before."

"What's it like?"

"The hardware? It's a box a yard square on each side." He looked across at Petrovitch. "That's not what you mean, is it?"

"No," said Petrovitch. They were at the start of the wide-open concourse, and he deliberately slowed down to stay in the crowd. "How does it feel?"

"Reality is imperfect compared to VirtualJapan. It flows, whatever the loading. I haven't found an upper limit to its bandwidth yet. I don't know if it even has a limit." Sorenson gazed at the tower, and was distracted for a moment. "Now, that's something I could do." He left without explanation, and Petrovitch watched him make the long walk to the revolving doors. He disappeared from view.

"Hello."

He spun around. Sonja Oshicora stood in front of him, slightly away from the edge of the pavement. She was almost alone, but was protected by a loose circle of men that now surrounded him, too. The people who walked by on their way to the towers or along the side of the road moved around the circumference: inside was empty but for the two of them.

Most of the Oshicora guards were looking out, but two of them were watching Petrovitch, and they both had their hands inside their jackets. Petrovitch moved his own hands very slowly, so that they were always in view. He made certain that they went nowhere near his bag.

"Hello," he replied, uncertain of what else to say. Certainly nothing that would prolong the conversation.

She, however, had other ideas. "You do remember me, don't you?"

"I… I'm not likely to forget." He watched her tuck her exquisitely cut hair behind her ears and smile with impossibly white teeth.

"It's good to see you well again," she said, as if suffering multiple

heart attacks was a minor inconvenience. “You are well, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. Fine.” He wanted to run again; away, as fast as he could.

“Good,” she repeated. She talked like she was fey, otherworldly. Compared to Petrovitch, she was. “I understand my father has already thanked you for your actions.”

Again, actions: fleeing through the Metrozone while Ukrainian gangsters tried to kill him. The word didn’t do it justice at all.

“Everything’s settled. No honor debt, no favors owing, nothing. It’s all fine.”

If she noticed his discomfort, she ignored it. “I wanted to thank you myself,” she said. In one step, she was pressing her lips against his. Her breath was warm, tasting of spice, smelling of flowers.

In return, he was rigid with fear. What lasted only a moment seemed to go on forever. He thought he might have another seizure there on the concourse.

She released him, and looked out from under her fringe. Her brown eyes seemed impossibly, animé large.

“Sam,” she said. “I can call you Sam, can’t I?”

“Yeah,” he squeaked. Someone had stolen all his oxygen, and he had a good idea who the culprit was.

“Thank you, Sam.” She smiled again, and that was it; his audience was over. She walked toward the Oshicora Tower, trailing her scent along with her bodyguards, leaving him pale and trembling in the humid, stinking air that blew across the city.

He stood motionless as the bubble of isolation that had surrounded him pricked. Again, he was shoulder to shoulder with the Metrozone. He wondered what Old Man Oshicora would make of it, and hoped that if he was watching, he’d make nothing of it at all.

It was a short walk to the lab. Time, finally, to do some work.

He opened the door slowly, so as not to disturb Pif. She was precisely where he’d left her, crouched over her desk, staring at sheets of minutely detailed equations. If she knew he was there, she made no sign of it.

He threw his bag on his chair, collected her empty mug and rinsed it out using bottled water and his fingers, pouring the brown-stained contents into a pot plant. Then he busied himself making coffee: spooning the granules, boiling the water, stirring and breathing the steam in.

She still hadn’t moved. Even when he delivered the fresh mug to her desk, setting it down exactly on the sticky ring left by the previous brew.

“Pif? Are you catatonic again?”

One eye twitched.

She got like this sometimes, caught up in a recursive math loop that rendered her higher functions incapable of voluntary action. Petrovitch waved his hand in front of her face; her eye twitched faster.

"Yeah, okay. A drop of the hard stuff should sort you out." He went behind her desk and opened the drawer that contained the bottle of lemon juice. He spilled some into the palm of his hand and brought it close to her nose.

She blinked, made a face, and recoiled.

"Sam," she said. "How long?"

"No idea. I just got in."

She stretched extravagantly, and Petrovitch disposed of the juice the same way he'd gotten rid of the coffee dregs. She gave a cry of pain.

"You okay?"

"Pins and needles. I'll be fine in a minute. Ow ow ow."

"How you don't get pressure sores is a miracle." He wiped his hand on a suitable leaf and used a wet wipe to clear the stickiness away.

"My neck hurts too."

"You're not safe to be left on your own." He pulled out two cellophane-wrapped pastries from his bag. "They're a bit squashed, but they're fresh. Ish. At least, I only just bought them."

"Give me a minute to boot up." She dug her knuckles into her left thigh and grimaced. "What's the time?"

"Half eleven." She clearly expected him to carry on. "On the Tuesday."

"Good. I thought I'd wasted a whole day." Pif tried to stand, using her desk for leverage. She wobbled like Bambi, then managed a semblance of upright. "I have good news and bad news."

Petrovitch passed her a pastry. "Good news, please. My life is so irredeemably *pizdets* that I can't cope with anything bad."

"We haven't got any competition. I may have been as subtle as a brick casing out the opposition, but we're in front."

"Stanford?"

"Out of sight." She took a few tentative steps and didn't find them too painful. "Are you sure you don't want the bad news? I mean, after yesterday, how could it get worse?"

"Well, I was woken up this morning by a desperate American trying to get me to gang up on some very serious Japanese criminals. After breakfast I got picked up by the *organitskaya* and threatened with not one, but two guns. Then I got kissed by the daughter of the Japanese crime boss right in front of all her bodyguards. To be fair, I haven't died today, but it's not even lunchtime yet."

"I can't get from the quantum to the classical," she said.

The gears in Petrovich's mind spun up to speed. "It didn't bother Maxwell."

"Maxwell was a genius standing on the shoulders of other genii. He made *a priori* assumptions that happened to turn out to be right."

"He didn't predict wave-particle duality, or quantum effects."

"But we can't ignore them. Can we?" A note of doubt crept into Pif's voice.

"Yeah. We can. Look at the gravitomagnetic equations. They do just that. And frame dragging works."

"But… what about chromodynamics?"

Petrovitch reached forward and took one of the sheets of paper from her desk. "You're doing this ass-backward. You're trying to mash the electrostrong into gravity and it just won't work. Well, it might, but remember: it's supposed to be beautiful, not ugly. This," he said, shaking the paper, "is ugly. I never liked it. It's inelegant. What you cooked up yesterday is poetry."

"If I can't prove it, it means nothing." She ripped at the pastry with her teeth, spitting out the cellophane and chewing on what was left.

"Start at the beginning. Ignore everything else. Gravity might not even be part of a theory of everything."

"It is," she said, spraying crumbs. "I feel it in my soul."

"So did Einstein and he took two decades at the end of his life to get precisely nowhere."

"You said it was poetry." Pif looked at him reproachfully.

"Ass-backward poetry." Petrovitch stood in front of the whiteboard with his coffee.

Pif started to say something, and he held up his hand.

She waited and chewed and drank.

"Can you," he said, his voice no more than a whisper, "derive all the other forces from this equation? If we expand this to be multi-dimensional," and he swallowed, "we can find out just how many dimensions reality has."

She looked, and rubbed her eyes. "I… don't know. I'm too tired to think straight anymore."

Petrovitch shook his head. "Look, this is your baby. And your math is way better than mine. Go and get your head down: this will still be here when you get back."

She groaned. "I don't want to leave it. We're so close."

"It'll be fine. I don't want to come in here tomorrow and have to pry the finished proof out of your cold, dead hand. I'll try and do some of the easy stuff—if I can manage that. That still leaves the really hard sums and most of the credit for you."

"Don't break the symmetry," she warned.

“I thought I was supposed to.”

“Try without.”

“I’ll try with, then try without. And I’m going to use some real data, whether you like it or not.”

“Experimentalists. Have I told you how much I hate them?”

“Only about a thousand times.” Petrovitch shrugged. “Science: it works.”

Pif drank her coffee, and summoned enough strength to pick up her rucksack. “Are you sure about this?”

“Go,” he said. “See you in the morning. You can go through my shabby math while I cringe pathetically in a corner, then I can watch you reimagine the whole universe.”

She slung the rucksack over her shoulder. “If you put it like that, I don’t see how I can argue.”

“I might even get some of my own work done. You never know.”

“Boys and their toys,” she said, edging toward the door. “Sam, are you…?”

“Go away. There won’t be any sleep for a week if you crack this.”

She bowed her head, her beaded hair falling forward like a curtain. “Sam?”

“What?”

“I’m glad I’m sharing a room with you. You get me.”

“You mean you’re as dysfunctional as I am, just in different ways? Yeah, that’s about right. Now, in the name of whatever god you believe in, go.”

She nodded. She was halfway out into the corridor when she stopped. “What?” she said with typical directness.

“Police,” said a familiar voice.

“*Chyort voz’mi!*” He launched himself into his chair and folded his arms.

Pif put her head back around the door. “Sam? There’s a policeman here.”

“I know. Send him in, then go home. I’ll be fine.” He pushed his glasses up his face. “He’s not staying for longer than he absolutely needs to. Which is about a minute, if he’s lucky.”

Chain wandered in, blinking. “Petrovitch.”

“Detective Inspector Chain. Found my rat yet?”

“Ongoing inquiries,” he said. He glanced down at Pif’s desk and reached out to pick up one of her equations.

Petrovitch leaped up and slapped his hand down on top of the paper. “Touch nothing. Really.”

Chain held his hands up. “It didn’t look like it was going to break, but if you insist.” He looked around. “I was expecting big machines that sparked and hummed.”

“We keep those in the basement next to the reanimated bodies. What do you want?”

“Oh, I don’t know. How about five hundred thousand euros?”

“Back of the queue, Inspector. I have to be dead before you collect.”

“You think you’re smart?”

“I think I now stand a better chance of staying alive than I would relying on you. And thanks ever so much for sending Sorenson around. Not only did it get us both picked up by Marchenkho, I then had to get farmboy back to Oshicora before he realized his pet coder had gone awol.”

“You’re welcome,” said Chain. He opened a filing cabinet drawer and peered inside. “Interesting character, Sorenson. Did he give you his war hero spiel?”

“He might have mentioned something; it didn’t get him very far. Why?”

“That sort of stuff goes down really well in America, gets the folks onside. He tried it on me, so I thought I’d try and find out what he actually did for Uncle Sam.” He rolled the drawer shut. “It’s not pleasant reading. His civilian file is pretty thick, too. Not like your records—what little there is seems to fit together very neatly.”

“The truth has a habit of doing that.”

“So does something manufactured. You see, I can’t find any trace of a Samuil Petrovitch, aged twenty-two from St. Petersburg at all. Which could mean one of two things.”

Petrovitch pushed his glasses up his nose. “No, don’t tell me. I like games. I’m an Armageddonist with a suitcase bomb and head full of righteous fury, biding my time for, what, six years now before I set my nuke and kill you all. Or alternatively, Russian record keeping isn’t what its supposed to be. Your choice, I suppose.”

“Something’s not right, Petrovitch. I don’t like that. It makes me nervous, and when I get nervous, I get curious. Like a dog with a bone.”

“Your metaphors are all mixed, Inspector. You’d better watch out for that.” Petrovitch flexed his fingers, making his thumbs crack. “If that’s all, don’t let the door hit your *zhopu* on the way out.”

Chain harrumphed, then wandered to the door. He reamed at his eye, and coughed hard. When he was done, he leaned on the handle and turned back to Petrovitch.

“Is she a good kisser?”

“*Ahueyet?* You’ve been following me!” Petrovitch stood up and went nose to nose with the detective. “No. You followed Sorenson. No, that’s not all of it, either. You bugged Sorenson so you could follow him.”

“Calm down, Petrovitch.” Chain put his hands up between them.

“Do you know what Oshicora will do if they find a police tag on him?”

“Pretty much.”

“They’ll kill him.” Petrovitch was breathing hard.

“Careful of your heart. But of course, you’re getting a new one, so it won’t matter soon.” Chain stepped out of the way of the opening door. “I could deport Sorenson right now, but I’m increasingly interested in this VirtualJapan he’s working on. I’d lose all that.”

“And you wonder why people hate the police.”

“No,” said Chain, “I’m up to speed on that, too. Go carefully, Petrovitch.”

13

Petrovitch only had half his mind on his tensors. The other half was gnawing furiously at an entirely different problem.

After ten minutes, he gave up, threw his pen down in disgust and dug around in his jacket pocket. Sorenson's card was white and shiny, with a little animated logo spinning around in one corner. It had the company phone number embossed across the front, along with the URL: the back was over-printed with Sorenson's name and mobile number.

He tapped the card on the desk, considered putting it back, considered throwing it in the bin, considered trying to tear at its hard plastic edges until it broke. He tossed it to one side and looked at the equation he'd started.

"*Raspizdyai kolhoznii,*" he muttered. The card stared back at him.

But he couldn't concentrate.

He wrenched open a drawer and unrolled a keyboard. His screen was under a pile of books he hadn't quite got around to returning to the stacks: he dragged it out and propped it against the fading spines. Some of the pixels had failed due to the weight of paper, but he could see around them.

He tapped the rubbery keys to make sure he had a connection, then logged on to his own computer.

There was a touch pad somewhere. He moved some monographs, and it was hiding underneath. He nudged it closer to the keyboard and got the two talking.

If he'd had his rat, the whole operation would have been simplicity itself, but he hadn't bought it to make his life easy. He'd bought it for his insurance policy, the one he'd have to cash in if his world came tumbling down around him.

He contemplated his need for his missing hardware while listening to the ringing of Sorenson's phone.

"Sorenson."

"Are you alone?"

"Who is this?"

"Shut the fuck up, Sorenson, and listen to me. Don't say my name. Are you alone?"

There was a pause. "Yes. He's just left."

"Right. There is a very good chance that you're still wearing a bug that Chain planted on you. I know you changed your clothes this morning, and I don't know if that makes a difference, but I wouldn't risk it."

The silence that followed was long enough that Petrovitch pinged

Sorenson's phone to make sure it was still on.

"How do you know?"

"Because Chain's just been to see me and casually let slip that he's been listening to our conversation all morning."

"What should I do?"

"I'm not your agony aunt, Sorenson. I've done the right thing, and now I'm hanging up. Oh, and I might not care about whatever horrible things you've done in the past, but both Oshicora and Chain seem to know all about them. Goodbye."

He closed the connection and deleted the phone from his records, then cleared all the computer components away. He was reasonably confident that the phone call was untraceable and anonymous. Confident, but not certain.

He shook his head. There was nothing to worry about. Nothing at all. He picked up his pen again and adjusted his glasses, allowing his concentration to blot out all external distractions.

His pen hovered over the paper, and then started to write. Symbols and letters spilled out, each line getting progressively longer than the one before. Then, with a blink and a pair of raised eyebrows, he started whittling away at the expressions, reducing pairs of them to simpler equations or single values.

He'd almost finished, and he felt a rush of cold heat inside. Something was falling out of the mass of complex mathematics, something that he didn't recognize but which carried the elegance and beauty of true meaning.

He stared at the final line. Now that he was done, he felt growing doubt. Pif would look at it and laugh, then show him where he'd gone wrong. It wasn't that he was terrible at math, just that he wasn't as good as she was. She only had to look at an equation to taste its use and quality.

Petrovitch started to work backward, trying to justify each step to himself, testing each part for error, when he was interrupted by a polite knock at the door.

No one ever knocked. No one he knew was emotionally or socially equipped to knock and wait. Doors were to be shoulder-charged and burst through.

He set down his pen and cleared his throat. "Come in?"

It was Hijo who stepped in first. "Petrovitch-san? Is this a convenient time?"

Petrovitch felt the sudden drop in his blood pressure, and its equally sudden surge as his defibrillator compensated. His hands shook and he clamped them flat on his desk to stop their telltale movement.

"Petrovitch-san?" asked Hijo again.

"Convenient for what, precisely?"

"Mister Oshicora would like to talk to you about a matter of some delicacy."

Petrovitch had no idea what he meant. It didn't sound good but not only did he have nowhere to run to, he had no way of running. In his current state, he'd get halfway down the corridor before keeling over clutching at his chest.

"I suppose now's as good a time as any."

Hijo looked around the room, and took in the closed blinds, the pre-Armageddon paint, the unpleasantly sticky lino, the vague, haphazard attempts to humanize the workspace. He nodded and stepped back outside.

Petrovitch peeled his sweaty palms off the desk top and started to stand. Oshicora came in and closed the door. He smiled and gave his little bow.

"*Vsyo govno, krome mochee,*" said Petrovitch to himself, closing his eyes.

"Pardon, Petrovitch-san?"

"It's an old Russian saying, nothing to worry about." He decided to put a brave face on the situation. It might be his last few minutes on the planet, but he was determined to go out with his middle finger firmly extended in salute. "We're not exactly set up for visitors here, but you can have my chair."

"Your colleague, Doctor Ekanobi, is not here?"

"No. She went—I sent her—home. She was working all night and I thought it best."

"I will sit at her desk, if you have no objections." Oshicora moved the wheeled chair aside and sat on the very front of it. His attention was drawn, like Chain's before him, to the handwritten equations. He lifted the top sheet up and examined it carefully. "It seems strange, anachronistic even," he said, "that in this modern world there is still a place for pen, ink and paper."

"Computers can only do so much," said Petrovitch. "They can still only do what we tell them to do."

"So very true," mused Oshicora. He put the piece of paper down on the pile, exactly where he'd found it. "Your work progresses well?"

Petrovitch looked down at his own desk, at the lines of script that had fallen from his nib. "This isn't my work. I'm just helping out."

"You are a very talented man," said Oshicora. "Which is rare enough. You are also compassionate. The two qualities combine to make you an attractive prospect to a certain young woman of our mutual acquaintance."

It wasn't about tipping Sorenson off. It was about Sonja. Petrovitch's sense of relief was like being picked up by an ocean wave:

cold, clear, irresistible. He even laughed.

"I have no feelings one way or another toward your daughter, Oshicora-san, romantic or otherwise."

"She kissed you," he said.

"She caught me off-guard. I didn't know she was going to do that until she did it."

"She is impulsive. Naïve and impulsive. I do my best to protect her without damaging her further." Oshicora looked pensive, before restoring his mask of equanimity. "May I explain?"

"Only if you don't have to kill me later. Otherwise, I'd rather not know."

"I do not wish you dead, Petrovitch-san. Many years ago, I met an English teacher in Tokyo. English, in both senses: she was English, back when there was an England to come from, and she taught English. She was charming, exotic, very different from the Japanese girls I knew. We became close. We married. We did all the things that married people do."

"I get the picture," said Petrovitch, looking away embarrassed.

"Quite. We had children, and it suddenly became difficult for us. I was Japanese, my wife was incurably English, but our children were neither. We loved them, but…" Oshicora's fingers curled into a fist. He forced them to relax. "It is difficult to say these things without sounding like a racist. While Japan stood, these things did not matter. Our culture, our language, our existence was secure. With it gone, everything is in doubt. It would be very easy for us to lose our identity within a few generations."

Here was this man, this pitiless crime lord well on his way to owning half of the Metrozone by racketeering, theft and murder, talking honestly and openly about his family. From the joy of not being shot like the traitorous dog he was, Petrovitch was now grimacing as his gut contracted into a small, shriveled knot.

"I said children," sighed Oshicora. "Sonja was all I had left after Japan fell. My wife, my two boys were lost. They disappeared, and although I have scoured the face of the planet for them, I cannot find them. All my hopes and dreams now rest in my daughter. For these reasons, she will marry a Japanese man of pure blood. And not, I regret to say, a radiation-damaged Slav."

Petrovitch swallowed hard against his dry throat. "I don't want to marry your daughter, Oshicora-san."

"I am afraid our problem runs deeper than that. The attraction between me and my wife was partly because of our differences. It seems to be a case of like father, like daughter." He raised his eyebrows.

"*Chyort!*"

“Her infatuation will be short-lived, but I would appreciate your cooperation in not prolonging it. Do we have an understanding, Petrovitch-san?”

“Yeah. Absolutely. I’d cut off my little finger if I thought it would make you believe me more.” The thought terrified him, but he’d do it.

Oshicora shook his head slightly. “That will not be necessary. Thank you for your discretion in this, and earlier matters. I have a policy of only employing *nikkeijin* within my organization. Sorenson was an exception, and I had other reasons for that which you know about. You, Petrovitch-san, would have proved very useful, above your already great service to me. Sadly, it is not to be. Still, come the revolution, you will be spared.”

Petrovitch blinked slowly, then caught the slight upturn on Oshicora’s mouth. “Very funny. In Russia, the revolution has you.”

“Have we concluded our talk, Petrovitch-san? Are we parting on good terms?”

“I believe so.”

Oshicora stood up and bowed. “Again, I am in your debt.”

“No, no you’re not.” Petrovitch got to his feet, and realized just how weak he was; physically and emotionally drained.

“You would have made a good son-in-law, I think.”

“And a lousy husband.”

On his way to the door, Oshicora said off-handedly: “I would have offered you money to stay away from my daughter. A great deal of money.”

“And I would have turned it down,” said Petrovitch. “It’s more honorable this way.”

“A good word for a virtue that is in short supply. *Sayonara,* Petrovitch-san.”

When he’d gone, when Petrovitch had waited for five minutes and Hijo hadn’t leaped into the room to behead him with a *katana,* he fell across his desk, limp and useless.

He’d gotten away with it. Again. He’d ridden his luck so hard, so far, that surely it had to be spent by now.

Coffee. He boiled up some more water, and shoveled granules into the dregs of the previous brew. Then he sat back down and couldn’t quite believe he was still alive.

There was work to do, though: he had to have something to show Pif when she came back in, even though he knew from experience that when she chose to sleep, she could be out for the best part of a day. In the current circumstances, with everything that was at stake, he guessed she’d catnap. A couple of hours and she’d return, running on adrenaline, caffeine and sugar. Much like himself.

He looked at what he’d done that morning, and wondered if he’d

made a mistake copying out the original equations of state. Pif would beat him with the stupid stick if he had, so he wheeled himself around to her desk, nudging the other chair aside.

He checked every symbol with exaggerated care, finally coming to the conclusion that his errors were entirely of his own devising.

Then he spotted it, stuck to the desktop under Pif's papers, in plain sight to anyone who looked. A bug, the same size and shape as the one he'd found in his shoe. Just like the one Marchenkho's hired killers had used to find him.

"*Sooksin,*" he breathed.

It wasn't Marchenkho. The one Sorenson had picked up had been Chain's. And this one, slipped under Pif's working-out when he'd fiddled with it, was Chain's. Which probably meant that the first one had been his, too. He'd been tricked.

Then the awful realization struck him. Not that Harry Chain had let him believe that Marchenkho had bugged him, but that he was still bugged.

No, not that either. Why would Chain make an attempt to plant another device on Pif's desk? Because the first one had gone wrong. He took off his jacket and pulled it inside out, searching every seam, folding back the collar, examining every pocket. Then his T-shirt.

Then his trousers, again turned street-side in, and his socks, damn it. Even the waistband of his pants, though he was sure he'd have noticed Chain rummaging around in there while he was still wearing them.

His boots. He took each one off and felt around inside them, then by chance and out of desperation, turned them over. It was there, on the right boot, tucked in the angle between heel and arch. The glue hadn't adhered properly to the dirty underside, and half the tab was flapping around, folded back on itself. The plastic cover had worn through, and some of the circuitry had been severed.

Where had he gone? Walked the short distance up past the palace to Green Park. Straight from Chain's office to Oshicora's. It had to have malfunctioned before then, otherwise he'd have been overheard organizing a half-million-euro counter-hit with Oshicora. That Chain had missed that was down to pure, unadulterated luck.

Petrovitch was at the end of the line. It was time to get off and change trains, right now.

14

On Monday morning, everything had been fine. By Tuesday lunchtime, he was teetering on the brink of disaster, and might even be over the edge of the abyss.

The thought he struggled with was that he'd walked right into Oshicora's private park and met with the man himself without getting the once-over for weapons or wires. Or maybe he had, and the security was so discreet that he hadn't noticed. Perhaps the inside of each and every lift was a screen.

Sorenson hadn't been pushed against a wall and shot—not yet. It was a good but confusing omen, adding another element of doubt to a critical choice: whether to ditch his current identity and sleeve up with a new one. He'd done it once before, to get out of St. Petersburg in one piece. He'd prepared for this moment for years. He always told himself that he'd do it if it looked like someone was close to discovering who he really was. It should have been as automatic as a reflex.

Petrovitch was twelve months away from becoming Dr. Petrovitch. Petrovitch had just written down a way to combine two fundamental forces of nature. Petrovitch was about to get a free ride to glory on the coattails of a future Nobel Prize winner. None of that would matter one iota if Petrovitch got locked up for twenty years.

The drumming of his fingers on the desk was the only outward sign that he was in an agony of indecision. He'd always assumed that it'd be his past catching up with him. Instead, he'd collided catastrophically with the future. Every time he returned to the question of whether any of this was worth imprisonment or worse, he looked down at his morning's calculations.

There was no point in prevaricating. He knew if he stayed, Chain would get him, and if not Chain, Oshicora, and if not Oshicora, someone else. It was time to say goodbye to Samuil Petrovitch.

He grabbed his bag and headed for the door. Then he reversed himself and grabbed the piece of paper from his desk. He dropped it on Pif's, and scrawled a big question mark at the bottom of the page. She'd know what he meant, even if she never saw him again.

Now he was ready.

He took the wheezing lift down to the ground floor and out onto Exhibition Road, from where he took the travelator to the Underground. He wouldn't normally go by tube at this time of day; if it was crowded in the early morning, by lunchtime it was unspeakable.

Since this was going to be one of the last times he'd have to

endure it, he suffered the crush gladly. Where next? Somewhere cold, somewhere clean—Canada, Scandinavia, New Zealand's southern island.

If he'd had his rat, he'd be booking plane tickets under a different name, storing data before wiping it clean away, using the unparalleled power of his machine to hack the Metrozone Authority's database and activate a sleeper personality he'd stored on there years ago.

If he'd had his rat, he could have done it now, all in the space of a single journey to the airport: Petrovitch would vanish, and another man would arrive luggageless at the airport to fly away to a new life. Even his failing heart could be spirited away. He didn't need a Metrozone hospital for that. Any big city would do.

If, if, if.

It was why he'd bought the rat, to cover this very event. But he didn't have it anymore. Plan B, then.

He'd have to disappear the old-fashioned way, and that gave him time to make one last appearance as Petrovitch.

He eventually emerged from the tube, breathless and bruised, at Edgware Road: not the Bell Street exit, because it was cordoned off and sealed, but the Harrow Road one, south of the Marylebone Road.

St. Joseph's was opposite, the bullet-scarred doors open. He sat on the steps and waited. As he listened to the service going on inside, he could hear, over the growl of the traffic, distant but distinct pops of gunfire from Paradise. The natives were restless. A black speck against the gray sky, a police drone flew in lazy circles high above the towers, and it was likely that it was the flier that the militia were aiming for.

He watched their target practice until his name was shouted out behind him.

"What are you doing here?"

He looked over his shoulder. Father John was shaking the hand of an elderly parishioner; when he released his grip, the hand went on shaking. Parkinson's, vCJD, something like that.

"I'm saying sorry, Father." Petrovitch stood up and dusted his backside down.

"And what are you sorry for?" Half a dozen people, all of them bowed and gray-haired, trooped by, walked slowly down the steps and vanished into the crowd that streamed past.

"You mean, apart from your church getting shot up? I've met the bosses of both sides: neither of them seemed too bothered about carrying on a gun-battle on holy ground. I guess you could call them yourself if you want, see if you have any luck in screwing them for some compensation."

"Blood money, Petrovitch." Father John wiped one sweaty palm across the other. "You do understand the concept, don't you?"

“Yeah,” said Petrovitch with a snort. “Yeah, I do.”

“You said, apart from.” A shadow fell across the priest from behind Petrovitch. “Why are you really here?”

He looked up at Sister Madeleine, and his heart did that thing that might have been a software glitch. “I lied to you,” said Petrovitch. “Or rather, I didn’t tell you the truth.”

The sister frowned down at him, trying to remember. “Which bit?”

“All of it. But that’s not important right now. Ask me again. Ask me again why I did what I did, and I’ll tell you.”

She glanced over at Father John, covered in confusion. “He’s the priest. If you want to confess…”

“No,” said Petrovitch. “I’m not confessing. I’m not ashamed of what I’ve done.”

“Then what the hell are you talking about?”

Her choice of language startled him, he who used the most obscene insults imaginable. He pushed his glasses back up his nose to buy him some time. “I just wanted you to know that sometimes the people you hate most can change for the better.”

“I don’t hate you,” she said, equally startled. “Why would I hate you? I…”

“You will do. Go on: ask me,” he dared her.

“Excuse me,” said the father, but Petrovitch and Madeleine were staring so intensely at each other that his presence was forgotten.

“Why did you help her?”

“Because I used to be part of a gang that kidnapped people for ransom, and I didn’t want to see it happen ever again.”

Sister Madeleine’s eyes were wide open. “You?”

“Thanks. I was hoping that it wouldn’t be too hard to believe.” He adjusted his bag. “Forget about me. You won’t see me again.”

He started off down the steps, quicker than he ought. She called after him.

“Petrovitch, where are you going?”

He almost stopped. His feet dragged on the pavement. Then he picked up speed again and vanished into the crowd.

Vast, anonymous and brooding, the Regent’s Park domiks grew closer as he walked down the Marylebone Road. Petrovitch put a determined smile on his face. Even without the rat, the plan he had was pretty damn good.

Before he could put it into operation, though, he had to make sure he was free of any other little surprises that Harry Chain might have adhered to him. He needed a back-street electronics chop shop that would take his money without asking questions. Fortunately, in

the shadow of the huge domik pile, such establishments were two a cent.

He negotiated the purchase of a sweeper, and got the shopkeeper to throw in a battery and a demonstration of how the lipstick-sized device worked. He paid for it with the last of the money on his card, unwrapped the tiny black wand there and then, and swept himself in front of the counter.

He was clean, from the white-blond hairs on his head to the worn soles of his feet.

The sweeper went on a lanyard around his neck and under his shirt. He shouldered his bag, and crossed the road. There were cameras at the junction, looking down at the crowds that swarmed back and forth. He looked up and fixed one with a knowing stare. The next time he passed that way, the computers that could isolate and recognize a face would put a different name to his.

He kept on walking until the pyramid of domiks showed its entrance, shaped like an ancient megalith: a tunnel constructed of upright containers with others braced on top to create a space that was as high as a cathedral, the main street that pierced the core of Regent's Park. Sodium lights hung from above and burned orange, illuminating the hawkers, the whores and the hustlers who bought and sold everything and anything.

It was like the Nevskiy Prospekt during the darkest days of Armageddon. Winter, freezing Arctic winds howling down from Siberia, the bass rumble of generators and babble of voices, flashes of light and color, the whisper of rumors—they have bread, that stall sells poisoned vodka, those fish are radioactive—the stench of struggle. The good old days when he ran wild through the unlit streets, stealing books and candles.

He kept on through the market bustle until he got to the Inner Circle, a distribution road in the very heart of the pile. Some people, driven by madness or guilt, would walk the Circle until they dropped. There were others who would wait for them and then strip the corpses, and others still wouldn't wait even that long.

Regent's Park was like that.

Petrovitch found Staircase Eight and started climbing. He kept climbing until the stair-dwellers dwindled to nothing and the corridors were empty. There was one last bulkhead light, then nothing but blackness. He reached into his bag for a tiny key ring torch.

The blue light was no more than a bubble, but it was enough to see by. He walked on until he was blocked by a door equipped with a mechanical combination lock. He held the torch in his teeth and slid the lock cover aside.

The keypad was numbered zero to nine in a circle, and the code

was entirely crackable by someone who knew what they were doing. What else could hide Petrovitch's treasure but the Golden Ratio?

He pressed each button in turn, listening for the click of the mechanism: one six one eight zero three three nine eight eight seven four. There was the most subtle of noises, almost a sigh, and he leaned heavily on the handle beneath the lock. The bolts behind the door lifted clear of the frame and he swung inward.

The air was warm and stale, but dry; a pharaoh's tomb.

Inside, he leaned on the door and felt it grate shut. The bolts dropped back into place with an echoing bang. Petrovitch held up his single spark of light: the container was empty, save for a trunk in the far corner. Everything was just as he'd left it.

He stepped up on the trunk's lid, and felt above him. High up, on the wall, was a bolt. He pulled at it, working it from side to side until it slid across. There was another one, stiffer, but eventually it gave up and moved.

He hit between them with the flat of his hand, and forgot to turn his head or close his eyes. Light burst in, blinding him, flooding the domik, chasing out every shadow.

Petrovitch sat down on the trunk, took off his glasses and dabbed at his streaming face with his sleeves. He turned the torch off, then climbed back up to stand on tiptoe and look out.

He was in the highest level of containers, right at the very top, and he could see a swathe of the Metrozone, from southwest to northwest, hazy and indistinct at the ground, but the towers were clear and confusingly seemed closer. Oshicora's Tower was out of sight, to the south, but if he screwed his eyes up tight and wished, he could just about make out the subtle slope of the land that lay crushed beneath the weight of buildings; the Thames valley that stretched out beyond the M25 cordon, into the uninhabited wilds of the Outzone.

He realized that it wouldn't stay that way forever. The center could not hold.

Dreaming wouldn't solve any of his current problems. He turned his back on the view, and climbed down to the metal floor of the domik. He wondered if there was anyone beneath him, suddenly aware of new light footsteps over their heads. Maybe.

He opened the trunk. It wasn't locked, had no need to be locked, and the catches sprang aside easily. Inside were things of use, like a couple of blankets and bubble-wrapped electronics, and things of no use at all, just pieces of heavy paper bearing pictures of people who he'd never see again and thought him dead.

It was to those he went first, though. A pair of children playing in the low, red light of the midday sun, a girl called Irena and a boy called Alexander. A woman, the children's mother, face lined by hard

work and exhaustion. A man, lying in a hospital bed, bald, emaciated, drips in his arms and tubes up his nose, grinning and waving to the camera.

Fifteen years of life that amounted to a thin stack of photographs, and they weren't even his own memories anymore. They belonged to someone else, even if he could remember them in ice-sharp clarity.

He shook himself free of the reverie. He gathered up the items in bubble-wrap and laid them out on the floor: a laptop computer whose case was pre-Armageddon and components most definitely not; a solar panel, rolled up; a silvered umbrella, folded; a fat cube of nanotube battery; a bundle of wires to connect them all together. This whole collection of electronics was dusty, unused, untested. Ripe for replacement, in fact. He'd been thwarted in that: now all he could do was hope that everything would work as promised.

He took a methodical approach, getting power from the panel to the battery first, plugging in the computer, extending the antenna and aiming it through the window at one of the relay stations visible on a rooftop down below.

There was a signal. He could get online. He realized that he'd been holding his breath, and he let it all out with a moan.

He typed furiously, scripting and executing program after program. One to hide his access point, one to lock down his Clapham hab, one to copy and encrypt the contents of his hard drive, and another to send it in little packages to a hundred dormant mailboxes. One more to erase itself and then fall into dormancy.

He continued with his housekeeping, ripping up history. It took a little while. Some of the computers he was targeting were well defended.

He'd dealt with the past. Now for the future. He timed his death for just after midday tomorrow. He'd kill himself, swiftly, painlessly, and arrive dead at a hospital in Greenwich: cause of death, heart failure. The body would be shipped to the crematorium, his ashes claimed, and his sad demise would be registered with the Metrozone Authority.

He bought airline tickets to Wellington under another identity. In the morning, he'd tuck the little bundle of photographs in his bag, and Samuil Petrovitch would die. No one would mourn his passing.

15

It was still night when he woke up, but it could never be called dark. Swaddled in blankets, he climbed up onto the trunk to look out of the window, to see the brilliant lights of the city: from the fiery orange of sodium glare that burned at street level to the three-colored laser banks that scrawled logos and messages on the underside of the clouds. In between was the white glow and moving pictures of the towers, pointing the way to salvation. Points of light slid across the umber sky and along the roads, red above and red below.

It was bright to the edge of pain, sharp enough to cast his shadow on the blank wall behind him.

His computer was blinking at him. Even with a new name, he was still an infovore. He had time to look at the news before he started for the airport. He climbed down from his perch and sat cross-legged in front of the keyboard. He flexed his fingers, cracking each joint in turn, and went to see what today had brought.

It had brought chaos. His Tuvalu-based server had been hit by a massive surge in traffic: an old-school Denial of Service attack so huge that he couldn't get through to change the settings, reset it, or even put it to sleep. He pulled the plug on his connection and worried at his thumb.

He used a commercially available proxy, hiding his identity in amongst a mass of other anonymous browsers, and sniffed around his old local Clapham node. It was down, swamped by a tsunami of data.

He tried to connect with the university as a guest user: the host was unreachable. Several online forums he used to frequent had been rendered unreadable. Yet for the rest of the globe, it was business as usual.

Everywhere that he might have been found had been ruthlessly trashed: no finesse or subtlety, just terabytes of information thrown at any open port to clog them up completely. He was being targeted, quite deliberately.

He leaned back and wondered who might do such a thing.

Oshicora might, but it didn't seem his style. Marchenkho definitely, but he doubted that the man could use a computer, let alone coordinate something so complicated.

Sorenson: he had no cause to get at Petrovitch, no matter how bat-shit crazy he might be under his veneer of good-ol'-boy charm. And Chain was more careful, more likely to get others to do his work for him. But this was a blocking move, not an attempt to gain intelligence. Whoever it was was trying to prevent him from communicating, from seeing electronically.

So it came down to what they were trying to hide. Even though he would be dead soon, he needed to know. If it was a feint to flush him into the real world…

He knew the number for his hardwired phone extension in the lab. He bought a virtual phone online and called it. It rang for several minutes, but he knew to wait. Eventually Pif answered.

"What? Sorry. Didn't hear it, then couldn't find it." There were sounds of paper sliding to the floor, and muffled cursing. "Who is this?"

"It's Sam."

"You have to come in. Now."

"Is anything wrong? You're okay?" Petrovitch felt his pulse quicken.

"I'm okay. This note you left me…"

"Believe it or not, there's something more important than that. Don't go outside. In fact, call security and have them post a couple of guards at each end of the corridor. Tell them they need guns."

"What have you done?"

"Pif: Tuesday was even worse than Monday. I have ruined my life so completely, so thoroughly, I can't come back in. Ever. This is goodbye. But I had to warn you."

There was almost silence: nothing but the crackles on the line and the sound of her breathing. "Sam, what about the science?"

"Sam will be dead shortly. Before he goes, he wants to say it was brilliant working with you and that he'll miss you very much."

"I can't see any errors in your equation."

"His equation. Petrovitch's equation. And unless he's invented a time machine, he won't be coming back."

There was more silence.

"Tell me," he said, "I haven't invented a time machine."

"Not invented, as such. More described how it might be done. It's the difference between Einstein and the Manhattan Project." She even giggled.

"Pif, I can't wait forty years. And this isn't even why I phoned. Someone is trying to blindside me, presumably before coming after me with a *pushka*. Promise you'll stay safe."

She gave in. The whole tone of her voice changed. "Why, Sam? Why are they doing this to you?"

"Because I'm a bad man. You don't need to know any more than that. There is one last thing you can do for me, though. Is the university network up or down? It's isolated itself from the shit-storm that's being kicked up my side of the node."

"Up, last time I looked."

"If I give you my password, can you copy some files to my

supervisor?"

"You know I'm not supposed to do that, right?"

"Yeah. Pif: I'm going to be technically dead in a few hours. Violating my terms and conditions of usage isn't going to bother me."

"Hang on." She dropped the phone to the desk and opened several drawers, trying to find her handheld computer. Petrovitch heard it chime as it was turned on, then the phone was scraped up again. "Okay."

"Log on screen?"

"I'm there."

"s-a-m-u-i-l-dot-p-e-t-r-o-v-i-c-h."

"Done."

"d-four-d-five-c-four-d-x-c-four."

"I'm in."

"See the folder called Simulations? Click that and tell me what you see."

"You've got mail, by the way," said Pif. "Two thousand eight hundred and ninety-seven messages. Since when were you so popular?"

"I've been mail-bombed. Everywhere. I don't know who's doing it."

"I'll take a look."

"Don't open the reader! Everything will be loaded with viruses, worms, the works."

"I opened the reader, Sam."

"Close it! Close it!"

"It's all marked up as spam, except the first two. Know anyone called Sonja? She sent you a couple of seriously fat files."

Petrovitch's fists were white with frustration. "*Yobany stos,* Pif! Close the reader down."

"I've opened the first file. Video. She's quite pretty, isn't she?"

He screeched in frustration, imagining the havoc being unleashed on his precious work. "Close. It. Down."

"You'll want to listen to this," said Pif, and held the earpiece close to the loudspeaker on her computer.

"I don't want to listen to anything. I want you to stop it." It was too late. Pif couldn't hear him anymore. What he got instead was:

"… don't know what to do, I don't know where to go, I don't know anyone who can help me. Except you. You have to save me, Sam, because there's no one else."

In the quiet that followed, there was nothing but static on the line.

"Pif?"

"Sam?"

"Play it again."

"I thought you said…"

"Just play it. And get the phone in position before you do."

A series of clunks, followed by a click. A prelude to: "I hope this is you, Sam. I really hope it's you. They've killed my father. They dragged him away and they shot him. I heard it even though I wasn't supposed to. I don't know what to do, I don't know where to go, I don't know anyone who can help me. Except you. You have to save me, Sam, because there's no one else."

"*Sic sukam sim*. Pif, is this for real?"

"I can check the header for the xref and routing, but she looks scared, Sam. Who is she?"

He peeled his glasses off his face and rubbed his hand across his forehead. He was thirsty, hungry, and getting a headache. "Remember that *yakuza* kid I mentioned? That's her."

"Why does she think you can help her?"

"Because, by night, I dress up in skin-tight spandex and fight crime as the Slavic Avenger." Petrovitch squeezed his temples between thumb and forefinger. "It's because she's desperate."

"Do you want me to play the second message?"

"Only if it says something like 'Oops, my mistake, everything's fine and my very-much-alive father's not coming to kill you.' " He stopped abruptly, almost choking on his words. "*Raspizdyai!* How stupid can I get? Play the other one. Do it, Pif. Play it."

He could hear a rhythmic, hollow banging. He knew what that was: someone trying to beat down a door. Over the top of the cacophony was "Get me out of here, I'm begging you, get me out" followed by a series of gunshots and a shriek that was so loud it made the phone howl with feedback.

"And that's it," said Pif. "Someone pulls her to the ground, out of camera, and the last thing you see is a guy with a gun, pointing it straight at the screen."

Petrovitch wriggled his finger in his ear. "Can you do something for me? Save those two files onto a card and put it somewhere safe. Wipe the rest of the incoming mail. Then sit tight."

"Is it going to be okay?"

"No. No, it's not. But what that means is anyone's guess. I'll call you."

He hung up, then dialed the Oshicora Tower.

"*Moshi moshi*," said the operator.

"Good morning," said Petrovitch, "my name's Samuil Petrovitch; you might remember me from such incidents as 'hunted like a dog through the streets' and 'kissed by the boss's daughter.' I'd very much like to speak to Oshicora-san—he assured me that he'd take my call if

I had an emergency, and if this isn't one, I don't know what is."

He could feel the fear like a cold wind. It was true. His heart gave a little trip, and he shuddered.

"I am afraid," said the female voice, "Mister Oshicora is unavailable at the moment."

"I am afraid," countered Petrovitch, "that you're lying through your teeth. Find me someone in authority. Now, please, or I'll cut the connection."

Seamlessly, another voice spoke up. They were listening already. They were waiting for him.

"*Moshi moshi,* Petrovitch-san."

"Hijo-san? Is that you?" Petrovitch put his finger over the cancel key. Press it too early and he wouldn't learn what he needed. Too late and they might work out where he was.

"*Hai,* Petrovitch-san. What service can I do for you?"

"You can tell me if you've murdered Oshicora, shot your way into Sonja's room, and crudely attempted to keep me off the net, and like that was ever going to work. A simple yes or no will do."

Hijo laughed. It started as a chuckle and ended in a full-throated roar.

Petrovitch's finger rested lightly on the keyboard. "Listen to me," he said, "I've had enough. I've had enough of all this nonsense, of the whole shot-at, stabbed, bugged, threatened, hacked business. I don't particularly care what you do in your *peesku*-shaped tower. It doesn't bother me which psychopath is in control of whose private army. I'm not even—though it shames me to say so—going to lose much sleep over what happens to Sonja Oshicora. I've already decided to disappear: I won't trouble you again. You need to call off your cyber attacks, though. You're actually hurting people who aren't me."

"*Sumimasen,* Petrovitch-san," said Hijo. "You are a loose thread. We have to be tidy."

Petrovitch put his glasses back on his face and pushed them up with an extended finger. "Yeah. I'm offering you an honorable draw; you do your thing, I'll do mine. No tidying required."

"I must speak plainly," said Hijo. "It has been decided you must die. It is regretful, but necessary."

The injustice of it flushed his cheeks and filled his belly with fire. He was full to the brim with fury. Something snapped inside, and he suddenly found himself saying: "I am the one who decides when I'm going to die, you little shit. You want this done the hard way? Fine. I will take you down. I will cause you so much grief and pain that you'll wish you'd never been born. And you can tell Sonja this: I'm coming. One way or another, I'll save her. Have you got that?"

Hijo started to laugh again. "You? You?" He couldn't manage

anything else, he'd become so incapable of speech.

"I'm glad you find it funny," said Petrovitch. "*Zhopu porvu margala vikoliu*." He stabbed down with his finger. Hijo had gone from the inside of the domik. But not from inside his head.

He dialed again.

"Chain," said Chain.

"It's Petrovitch. I've something to show you. Meet me outside the south entrance to Regent's Park in half an hour."

"Very nice to hear from you again, Petrovitch. As much as I like you, I can't drop everything just because you call."

"It's about the Oshicoras."

"Half an hour, you say?"

"Yeah. Thought that might get your interest. I'm not walking, so bring your car. And body armor and a *kalash*. Better still, bring two sets. We're going to need them."

"We? What is this, Petrovitch? You planning on starting a war?"

"For a *dubiina,* you catch on quick. Be on time."

16

An old, stooped woman, head wrapped in a blanket, knocked on the side of Chain's car. Chain raised his eyebrows and waved her away. Her tapping became more insistent.

"It's me, you blind old *kozel*. Open up." Petrovitch moved the blanket aside far enough to reveal his ice-blue eyes.

Chain sighed and sprung the locks. Petrovitch heaved the car door open and slipped inside, bundling the blanket into the backseat. He pulled the door shut again, and looked around.

"Guns?"

"I have one. I'm the police, remember: we don't go handing out weapons to members of the public."

"Funny how they seem to get hold of them anyway." He reached behind him and pulled out a pistol from his waistband. It was tiny; Petrovitch could conceal it in the palm of his hand.

"I'm disappointed," said Chain. He turned the engine over and waited for it to catch.

"Yeah. My *yelda*'s much bigger." He made the gun disappear again. "How about the armor?"

"That I can let you have. You will have to sign for it, though, and according to the form, account for any damage it might suffer while in your care." Chain cocked an ear at the rattle coming from under the bonnet, then decided it was no worse than usual. He pulled out into the traffic without warning.

When the sound of horns had died down, Petrovitch put his feet up on the dash and leaned back against the headrest. "Nice car."

"You'd better not be wasting my time. I will charge you if you are."

"Yeah. Course you will. Don't worry, it'll be worth it."

"So: are you going to tell me where we're going, or should I just drive around for a while?"

"My lab. You know the way." Petrovitch took his glasses off and held them up to the early morning light. They weren't quite as filthy as Chain's car. "While we're on that subject: if you ever, ever try and plant one of your stupid little bugs on me again, I'll cut you like I'm butchering a *svinya* and turn your guts into sausage. You got that?"

Chain tutted. "Wrong side of the bed, was it?"

"Any bed would have been nice. The only reason I'm talking to you is because I can use you. The moment that becomes unnecessary is the moment I dump you like *govno*."

"Your turn of phrase is as poetic as ever." The car jerked to a halt. The lights strung across the road were green, but they were going

nowhere. “What the hell is the matter with the traffic now?”

Chain reached forward and fetched his satnav a couple of hefty blows with his hand. The screen flickered but refused to indicate an alternative route.

“You could always put on your blue light,” said Petrovitch.

“Ha. Ha. It’s been like this since midnight. Random, local gridlock, coming and going. Disappearing in one area only to appear in another.”

Petrovitch scratched his ear. “Has it got worse in the last thirty minutes or so?”

Chain looked across at his passenger. “Why would it?”

“Possibly because there’s a massive bot-net trying to take down the Oshicora servers. If that was the case, there’d be a lot of extra load flowing around the Metrozone. It might interfere with the traffic management. Just saying.” Petrovitch stared studiously out of the window.

Chain shook his head. “Are you going to tell me what all this is about?”

“No. You’ll have to see it for yourself.”

“Maybe you should’ve let me see it before you started screwing about.” The lights cycled to red without them moving. “Can this get any worse?”

The first raindrop left a dusty circle on the windscreen. It was there long enough to ball and run down the glass to the bottom before the clouds opened and rain drummed against the roof.

“Clearly it can,” said Petrovitch. The car in front edged forward half a length, and Chain claimed the space as his own.

The rain continued to blatter down, hard enough to make it seem like there was boiling water rising from the ground. The pedestrians either took shelter where they could, or hunched their shoulders and accepted the indignity.

Chain put his wipers on, smearing the grit and grease in two arcs. “I can remember when rain—any rain—meant danger. Everyone would listen to the weather forecasts and sirens would sound in the streets.”

“Yeah, pretty much the same,” said Petrovitch. “Except we didn’t have satellites or sirens. We just got wet and took iodine pills when we could.”

“This isn’t meant to be a game of ‘my life was worse than yours,’ you know. And your country never got bombed.”

“All we had to put up with was your fall-out; nuclear and economic. You had food relief; we didn’t. You had rebuilding projects; we didn’t. You had someone to blame; trivial, really, but we didn’t. Everyone looked after poor Europe, and we were left swinging in the

wind."

"Surprising," said Chain, gazing out at the traffic lights as they went from amber to green, "how much damage a handful of madmen can do. Why aren't we going anywhere?"

"You want to get out and walk? Or do you want to shut up?"

Chain sighed and scrubbed at his cheeks with his hands. They sat in silence, watching the rain fall.

"You heard from Sorenson?" asked Chain.

"Not since I warned him he might have carried your bug into the heart of Oshicora's operations."

Chain pulled a face. "Did I tell you about his father?"

"What about his father?"

"His old man was political—Reconstruction to the core—assassinated six, seven years ago. Case is still open. All the fingers pointed at Junior, but no one could pin it on him. Apparently, sniping's not his style. Explosives are, though." Chain leaned forward and set the wipers to double-time. Despite the deluge, people were getting out of their cars and walking toward the front of the queue. "What? What are they doing?"

Petrovitch reached behind him for his blanket. "There's only one way to find out." He pulled the material over his head again and opened the car door. The rain poured in, and within seconds he was soaked.

Chain turned up his collar and joined him—making sure to lock the car behind him. The crowd was uncharacteristically quiet; hushed enough to hear the soft roar of the rain, the scrape of boots on tarmac.

As they walked forward through the stalled lines of vehicles, they could see a line forming across the junction, deepening as more people joined it. Chain used his badge and his elbows to work his way to the front, and Petrovitch tucked in behind.

When they got there, they found the cross-wise street devoid of traffic: on the other side of the junction was a similar mass of onlookers. The lights were red in every direction.

"That's not right," said Chain.

Petrovitch tapped him on the shoulder and pointed. "Neither is that."

A solid phalanx of cars was crawling down Gloucester Place in the direction of the river. Every lane was taken up, four abreast, rolling slowly in a perfect line. Chain was about to step out and demand an explanation when Petrovitch touched his shoulder again.

"Don't."

There were people in the cars. From the frantic banging on the inside of the windows and the rattle of door handles, they didn't seem too pleased to be there. Some of the drivers were screaming into their

phones, and some of them were just screaming. They pulled at their steering wheels, dragged at the handbrakes, all to no avail.

They drove inexorably on.

The front of the procession drew level with them. Chain tried the door from the outside. It was locked, but neither could the wild-haired woman inside get it open.

"What are you doing?" he yelled at her.

"Help me," she mouthed.

"Chain?"

"Not now, Petrovitch." He pulled his gun and reversed it in his hand.

"This is important! All these cars, all of them: they're new."

"What?" Chain kept pace with the car and readied himself. He shooed the woman away from the passenger door and imitated what he was going to do.

"They're all this year's or last year's models; top of the range."

"You're not making any sense." The rain had penetrated everywhere; everything was wet, clinging, dripping.

"They're all automatic. They drive themselves, Chain."

Chain brought the butt of his gun down against the window. It bounced off with the same force, and he let out a strangled cry of pain.

"That'll be toughened glass, then," said Petrovitch. "Let's try this instead."

He stepped around the front of the car and took his bug-detecting wand from around his neck. He ran it up one side of the bonnet, then the other. At the top, on the driver's side, he got a signal.

He reached into his waistband and dragged out his snub-nosed little pistol. He pointed it down at the metalwork and pumped the trigger, once, twice, three times. Three sharp whipcracks; three holes.

The car stalled. The doors unlocked with a clunk. On hearing the sound, the driver threw herself at the passenger door, and Chain hauled her out.

The rest of the cars carried on. The car behind nudged the back of the disabled one, and started to shove it forward. Petrovitch skipped out of the way and stood in the torrent in the gutter as the grind of metal and the faint pattering of desperate hands on glass made its stately way down the street.

Thirty cars in all, no traffic in front, none behind. The crowd began to murmur and disperse, the show over.

Chain was struggling with his bruised gun-hand and the woman. She gasped and mouthed, and no words would come out. All the while, she grabbed at parts of his jacket to be reassured that he was real.

“Petrovitch? What did you do?”

“I killed it.” Petrovitch worked the slide and ejected the chambered shell into his hand. He tucked his gun away again.

“Explain. Excuse me, miss. Will you stop pawing at me?” He finally got his good arm up and held her away.

“I blew its brains out. Even your car’s not so old that it hasn’t got electronics under the bonnet.” Petrovitch took his glasses off and shook them free of water. “That’s what you’re going to have to do to each and every one of them.”

“Me?”

“You and your cop friends. Unless you’re happy for this to carry on?”

The broken car beached itself against a lamp-post further up the street. The obstacle it made caused ripples in the neat lines of cars, so that the advancing front was no longer perfectly straight.

Chain looked at the woman, who had started to wander away in a daze. She walked slowly and erratically toward her car, and when she was within range, she started to kick viciously at it with her heels.

“Is this your fault?” asked Chain.

“No more than it is the Oshicora Corporation’s. Which is to say, I don’t know.” He put his glasses back on, fat raindrops clinging to the lenses. “But I don’t see how it can be.”

“I’m going to have to call this in. I’m going to have to get help.” Chain flexed his fingers to check they all still worked. “Don’t think you’re off the hook.”

“Meet me at the lab. And I still want that body armor.”

“In exchange for that pathetic pea-shooter you call a gun.”

“*Potselui mou zhopy,* Chain. I seem to be the only one around here who knows what he’s doing.” Petrovitch’s blanket had fallen in the road. He wrung it out the best he could, adding to the flood at his feet. Then he held it over him and shook his head rapidly to try and clear his glasses.

“When did I stop being Inspector Chain?”

“When I caught you out, *zjulik*.” He watched Chain’s face fall. “Go on, go. The terrifying truth is that people’s lives might depend on you getting your *srachishche* moving.”

The rain continued to fall as they stared each other down. The lights changed; red, amber, green. Almost at once, horns started to sound, and those slow in clearing the crossing walked a little faster.

Chain looked down the road past Petrovitch at the block of cars gliding serenely as one again. He bared his teeth in a feral snarl and turned away, back to his own vehicle.

Petrovitch crossed to the other side, and on. He found that he was wet, cold, hungry, he couldn’t go home, he could barely risk going to

the lab without police protection, and he had the chill metal touch of gun against his waist.

He realized that he needed to be dry and warm and well-fed, or he'd end up stumbling and slouching to his death. He looked up with his water-spattered eyes at the street names and recognized where he was.

It was only a short walk, but he was shivering by the time he arrived. He could feel his heart large and fragile under his scrawny ribs as he took the steps up to the big wooden doors, still marked with bullets.

The door was closed. He took hold of the black iron hoop and banged it down. The sound echoed away inside. He did it again, then again, then hunched up on the narrow slice of dry stone provided by the doorway.

A bolt slid back, and the door opened to make a sliver of darkness.

He could see her narrowed eye regarding him from her great height.

"Sanctuary," he said.

17

Sister Madeleine took him in. She guided him around the plastic buckets dotted along the length of the nave that attempted to catch the copious drips from the roof, stopped to genuflect to the altar, then steered him into the vestry.

Father John wasn't there.

"Meeting with the bishop," she said. She took his blanket away, and then wondered what to do with the sodden lump. She threw it out into the church.

"Doesn't that mean you should be with him?"

"There'll be more Joans there than priests. He'll be perfectly safe." She stared at Petrovitch. "You realize that sanctuary was abolished in the seventeenth century."

He shivered uncontrollably under her gaze and wrapped his arms around himself. "I didn't know what else to do."

"I thought you had a plan for everything," she said, then added quietly: "You also said I'd never see you again."

She took a step forward, and for the briefest of moments he thought she was going to enfold him in her own robes. The look of utter panic on both their faces forced them apart.

She whirled around on the pretense of searching for something. "Doesn't take a genius to pack a raincoat."

"I had planned to be at the airport. Then something happened, and I found I needed to hang around after all."

She found an old two-bar electric fire and dragged it to the center of the room, frayed flex trailing behind it. "Needed to, or wanted to?" She crouched low down by the skirting board and forced the yellowed plug into a wall socket. The wires on the fire fizzed sparks and started to glow red.

"I can still go. Walk out, never come back."

She straightened up, faced him down. "Why don't you then? Why don't you just go away and leave me alone?"

"Because I made a promise I have to keep. I made a vow: you know what that's like, don't you? A vow so terrible, so final, that it turns you from a human being into an expendable weapon. I've burned my bridges, cast my dice, crossed the Rubicon. Whatever metaphor you choose, that's it."

She took several deep breaths. "So what is it that you're going to do? Die of pneumonia at someone?"

"Yeah. Thanks for that. It'd be nice if somebody took me seriously some time soon." He peeled off his jacket and dumped it on the threadbare carpet, then tried to bend down to unlace his boots. His

canvas trousers had become so stiff, and his fingers so weak, that he couldn't make any impact on the rain-shrunk knots.

Sister Madeleine got to her knees and bent low, worrying at the laces until she'd loosened first one, then the other. She looked up, face framed by her veil. "Can you manage now?"

"I'll cope."

"There are some choir robes in that cupboard. Put on as many as you want. It's not like we have a choir to offend." She pointed, then strode to the vestry door. "Look, Petrovitch…"

"Sam. It's Sam."

She leaned her head against the door frame. "We can be grown-ups about this, right?"

"Yes," he said, less convincingly than he'd hoped.

"Give me a shout when you're ready and I'll make some coffee."

"We can't make a start on the communion wine, then?"

She frowned at him. He shrugged damply back.

"It's in the safe," she said. "I don't have the keys."

"Coffee will be fine," said Petrovitch, laying his glasses on the desk and grasping the bottom of the death metal T-shirt.

Sister Madeleine saw the logo and the name, closed her eyes and shook her head. "All this in the house of God," she muttered as she left. She made sure she closed the door behind her.

Petrovitch struggled out of the rest of his clothes, pausing only to examine the scars on his chest. One was long and curving, livid against his shock-white skin, and the others short, raised lines like knife wounds, which is what they were: the work of a single cut of the scalpel. The latest of these bristled with black thread.

Everything he wore had wicked in twice its weight in water. Where he'd dropped his jacket, the red carpet had turned dark. Not good. But there was another door at the rear of the room, and judging from the draft swirling in, it led outside. He bundled up his laundry and threw it there instead.

In one of the heavy cupboards that smelled of incense and age, he found a rail of vestments. The black ones were the priest's; the gold ones he assumed were for special occasions. Then there were the bewildering array of white garments, some short, some long, some plain, some edged with lace. He had no idea what he was supposed to use.

In the end, he gave up, and took two of the shorter white robes and toweled himself off with them, then chose one of the longer ones to wear. When he finished fighting his way to the neck end, he found he looked like a marquee.

He managed to turn it to his advantage, though, by holding the hem of the robe over the fire and concentrating the meager output of

warm, ozone-tainted air inside.

"I'm sort of ready," he called.

She came back in, stooping through the doorway. When she saw him, she laughed.

"Yeah. Go on. Something to tell all your nun friends back at the convent."

"Trust me, there's not much humor in this vocation. Lots of funerals, if you like that sort of thing." She cleared a space for the kettle and unplugged the fire.

"Hey!"

"If I put both on at the same time, the fuses will blow."

"I can wire it so they don't."

"And will the church burn down afterward?"

"Not in this weather. Maybe later."

"We'll do it my way," she said firmly. She turned the kettle on, and retrieved two mugs from the desk drawer.

Petrovitch realized he was still holding the hem of his robe out. He let it go.

She sat down in the chair and hunched forward, fingers together; almost at prayer. "Where were you going to go?"

Petrovitch took a while to answer. "Far away. Where no one had ever heard of me, seen me. Somewhere I could start again. Make a better job of it than I did this time around."

"That your gun?" The sister looked over to where it sat on the desk, moistening the cover of the book beneath it.

"Yeah."

"Loaded?"

"Not much point in having one that isn't." Petrovitch went to pick it up, and she laid her hand across it.

"I should have checked you for weapons. Now I'm going to have to confess that before next mass." She glanced up. "And accept a penance. You're nothing but trouble."

The kettle boiled, and she dutifully made instant coffee spooned from a battered tin.

"What about you?" asked Petrovitch. "You don't seem, I don't know, very holy."

She plugged the fire back in. "Holiness is a work in progress. In the meantime, I can kick your bony ass through a wall, I can group twelve shots at fifty meters and I can take a bullet meant for my priest. The job description didn't mention sainthood."

"So what did it say?"

Her fingers tightened around her mug, and she blew steam on her face. "I was fifteen and I was going to end up killing someone. I was full of rage and hate, and I couldn't control it. Someone offered me a

chance; a chance to change what I was going to become. A new start, just like you."

"Yeah. Not quite like me."

The lights went out.

In the dying glow of the fire, Petrovitch snatched up his gun and pulled the slide. It was dark, a closed room without windows. He could hear the sister's clothing rustle softly, then the solid mechanical sound of her own, considerably larger gun being cocked.

He listened intently. There was the rain, the creaking of timbers, the splash of water in over-full containers. There was traffic noise and the clatter of domestic alarms. He could see where the back door was by the slit of light under it. He took two slow steps and stood beside it, back to the wall, ready.

The only movement in the room was now hers. The chair relaxed with a sigh as she rose from it. The air stirred as she walked. She made no sound herself. Even her breathing was below a whisper.

She stopped, and everything was still.

The vestry door gave a very slight shudder, just enough for whoever it was to tell it wasn't locked. Petrovitch crouched down and reached out with his free hand for his jacket. He found it, and pulled it slowly toward him. He felt in his pocket for his key-fob torch, which he gripped between his lips: his teeth rested against the on switch. He kept hold of the jacket.

The door opened a fraction. Something bounced on the carpet, once, twice, and landed close to his feet. He bit down on the torch and spun his jacket over the thick black disc.

A circle of actinic light flashed out from around the edges of the jacket, together with an almighty clap of thunder. Flames jetted up. He was deaf, but he could still see. He spat the torch out across the room, and suddenly someone was shooting at the tiny point of light as it sailed through the air.

Petrovitch dived the other way, brought his gun up and held his breath. His white robe reflected every last glimmer of light, but the man shrouded head to foot in black wasn't looking his way.

He shot him twice in the back, and the figure jerked each time. Petrovitch watched the man start to turn, then slip heavily to one knee. The strange green-glowing eye of night vision rested on him.

Their guns came around, and Petrovitch fired first, straight into his face.

Out of bullets. But there was a mostly full pistol in a dead man's grip right in front of him. He reached for it, and found himself in the crosshairs of another man in black. He looked up and saw a hint of green-cast skin.

"*Pizdets*." There was no way he was going to get hold of that gun,

let alone use it.

Then the man was enfolded in a shadow that lifted him off his feet and slammed him sideways. Bright flashes of gunfire moved in an arc, away from where Petrovitch lay.

He took the brief window of opportunity to pry the gun away from its entangling fingers, then immediately jammed the long barrel in the ear of the man who had come up behind the sister.

"*Otsosi, potom prosi,*" he hissed, and pressed harder. "Sister?"

She moved, and the body of the second gunman slid awkwardly to the floor. Petrovitch's jacket was still on fire. She stamped it out and picked up his torch, shining it right in the remaining man's night-vision goggles.

"Get his gun," she said, with such authority that Petrovitch felt his own nerve falter. "And get that thing off his face."

With the man disarmed, Petrovitch felt confident enough to wrench the goggles away. He wasn't Japanese.

"*Chyort!* I was so sure they were from Hijo."

The point of light moved from one hand to the other, and she took the man down with a punch to the stomach that made him double over before collapsing. She was on him, even while he was retching and gagging, dragging him up again by the neck and holding him against the wall. "I know who these bastards are. Paradise militia."

The man, the feared killer, resolved into just another street kid; a foot soldier for a gang who, like all the others, thought they could control part of the Metrozone. He clawed at Sister Madeleine's hand with his scabbed fingers and slowly turned blue.

"You're strangling him," noted Petrovitch.

"No. I'm suffocating him," she said.

"He can't tell you anything if he's dead too."

"I don't need him to tell me anything."

"Fair enough." Petrovitch closed the vestry door, and felt to see if there were bolts he could use. "Don't you lose your nunhood or something if you kill a man in cold blood, cursed to wander the earth forever?"

She let go.

"Also, don't you think we should be getting the *huy* out of here?" He stumbled across the body on the floor and put his hand down in a pool of dark, sticky liquid.

She stood there, staring at the weak, mewling form at her feet.

"We could still die here." Petrovitch wiped the gore off on his gown and crawled over to his boots. "We could still die and I'm wearing a *yobanaya* dress."

She moved, holding the torch high, and strode to the wardrobe

full of vestments. “Put this on, and this cape.” She threw them, complete with plastic hangers, at Petrovitch.

“Where’s your gun?” It was hard to put his wet boots on. He jammed his foot down and tore some skin off.

“I dropped it.” She was in the desk drawers, rattling their contents around.

“Not smart.”

“Listen to me,” she roared. “What do you know about fighting? What do you know about close-quarter combat? What do you know about knowing you’re going to be lucky to see the other side of twenty?”

“You just summed up my life, Sister. Now stop screwing around and get your gun. You’re going to need it.”

“I don’t need a gun to shut you up.”

“Yeah?” Petrovitch grunted with the effort of getting the other boot on.

“I could just break your stringy neck with my bare hands, like that guy in the corner.” She rattled an iron hoop loaded with keys. “Get that back door open.”

“I’m busy here.”

“I’m trying to save you. Get a move on!” The keys landed beside him.

“And a moment ago you were contemplating your navel. For some stupid reason it’s me saving you.” He pulled on the black cassock, arms up, and shrugged it down.

“I don’t need saving.”

“Yeah. Martyr yourself on someone else’s time.”

There should have been five guns in the room. Petrovitch could account for three of them, and a set of night-vision goggles proved too tempting not to take.

“What are you doing?” The desk fell over, making him jump.

“Scavenging. What are you doing?”

“Looking for my gun.”

“You mean it doesn’t come when you whistle?”

She heaved another piece of furniture aside. “Got it.”

Petrovitch piled the guns and the goggles on the cape, then scraped his wet clothes on top, even his ruined jacket. He picked up the keys. “Any idea which one?”

“Oh, give them here. You are impossible.”

He gathered the corners of the cape and tied them to form a bundle. “You don’t get out much, do you?”

The lock turned on the third try. “Ready?” she asked.

“Yeah. I still look like a *kon’v pal’to,* though.”

“You’re fussing about my gun: where’s yours?”

“I’ll be running. You’re the one who can shoot straight.”

She turned the torch off and gripped the latch.

“I know this is probably not the time to ask,” he said, “but how old are you?”

“Nineteen,” she said. She twisted her wrist and the sickly daylight flooded in.

18

At the bottom end of Edgware Road, she was still jogging effortlessly, while he was gagging with the effort of keeping up.

"Stop." Petrovitch squatted and put his head down between his knees. Rain dripped from his nose.

She stood over him, hands on her hips. "I don't think we're being followed," she said, scanning the crowded pavements. Umbrellas formed an uneven multicolored sea that flowed in every direction at once.

"Don't… think?" he gasped, and breathed through his mouth. He was aware that his heart was struggling, but there were more pressing pains like the burning in his lungs and the stitch that was threatening to split him open from groin to neck.

"I need to call Father John and warn him," said Sister Madeleine. She pulled out her phone from inside her robes and speed-dialed her priest. "Get some police round to the church."

"Do whatever you want." Petrovitch straightened up, clutching his sides. "I'm going to… *yobany stos*." He felt a fresh wave of nausea well up and drag him down. He coughed bile into the gutter.

"Where am I? Marble Arch. Yes, I know I can't go back. Our Lady of the Assumption? Warwick Street? Yes, I know it. Look, I'm going to have to call back. What? No, Petrovitch is throwing his guts up." She paused. "Yes, that Petrovitch. Long story. No, Father."

She saw Petrovitch trying to rise again, and she reached down her hand. Petrovitch clung to her arm and she pulled him to his feet.

"No, Father," she said, her voice becoming tight. "No. It wasn't his fault. Because it wasn't. It was Paradise. Yes. Can we save the questions for later: he's dying, and I'm drowning. What do you mean, is it raining? Of course it is."

Petrovitch hung on tight as his vision grayed. "*Chyort.*"

"No. I'm not doing that. Father, he… will you shut up and listen? His heart's packing in again and standing around on a street corner in plain sight of anyone who might want to kill us is not helping either. So I'm not asking your permission to get him somewhere safe; I'm telling you that's what I'm doing and I'll call you again when I've done it." Her thumb stabbed down and the phone was thrust away again inside its secret pocket. "Where are we going?"

"Imperial college. But not by Park Lane. Goes too close to Green Park."

"Bad?"

"Very. We'll have to go through Hyde Park."

She didn't look certain. "I ought to just call an ambulance."

“If they’re monitoring admissions, I’ll be dead in minutes.” He forced his legs to carry his weight. “You don’t have to come with me. It’s probably better that you don’t.”

“Shut up, Sam.”

There was nothing more to say. She marched him over the road. They passed the glistening shaven-headed man at Speakers Corner proclaiming a new machine jihad to the empty pavement, and slipped through the gates set in the wire fence that half-heartedly enclosed the park. Before them lay the warren of tents and shacks and shanties.

“Keep your eye on the Albert Hall. Too far left and you’ll end up in the Serpentine.”

She nodded grimly and looked up, fixing the dome against the buildings behind it. The rain had extinguished the open fires and damped down the miasma that hung over the refugee camp. It had even driven most of the inhabitants inside to seek whatever shelter they could scavenge.

It was loud, the drumming of the droplets on corrugated iron and stiff plastic; a roar that was deafening and disorientating.

“We could go round the long way,” she said.

“I won’t last the long way. Besides,” said Petrovitch, “neither the Oshicoras nor Paradise will follow us in. A priest and a nun should get a free pass.”

It was as if she was looking at him for the first time. “But you’re not a priest.”

“I won’t tell anyone if you don’t.” He plunged on into the narrow, twisting alleys, ready with a smile and a wave and a benediction, but determined never to stop. Hyde Park was where people went when they burned out of domik life. People went there to die. Petrovitch wasn’t going to be one of them.

Sister Madeleine followed, and he was glad for her at his back. If it hadn’t been for her, he would have tried the perimeter road. He hated Hyde Park: he could only look at so many hopeless faces before he felt rage overtake him. But who would he choose to grab and shout at? Too many, too many.

The house in the middle of the park had vanished, every part of it long ago scavenged for building materials: the rough paths still converged at that point though, nothing more than a memory.

They hurried on. They were deep in the park, surrounded on all sides. Petrovitch’s face was set in a rictus grin, but the sister was in tears as they vaulted over yet another half-rotted corpse. He took hold of her wrist.

“Come on, *babochka*. You can’t afford to care.”

“But…”

“They chose this.” He turned left and headed for the Black Bridge,

dragging her behind him. “There are no guards to this prison. And if you’re at all sensitive, don’t look over the sides of the bridge. Straight down the middle, eyes front.”

“How… how do you know these things?”

“Yeah. Doesn’t show me in a good light, does it?”

They arrived at the bridge. He didn’t follow his own advice: there were things in the dark water, little bloated islands that not even the seagulls dared touch. The wind had accumulated a small drift of them on the far bank, beached and slick where the rain beat down on them and cleaned the filth of the lake away.

When the Neva thawed in spring, there were always bodies washing under the St. Petersburg bridges along with the gray lumps of ice. But there was an effort to collect them, identify them, cut holes in the frozen ground and bury them.

That this—this squalor—was permitted, burned in his soul.

Not far now. The bridge carried a road, and the spaces between the rude dwellings roughly followed the remains of the tarmacked surface.

Someone had died, that night or that morning. They lay face down, features obscured by long graying hair. Their bones stuck out against their pale skin, each knuckle-joint a knot. They would have weighed no more than a child.

The rain beat at the body lying across their path, trying to dissolve it away.

She lost it. She shook him off hard enough to hurt him and crouched down beside the cold, stiff figure. She wept uncontrollably.

Petrovitch looked on, gazed at the short distance they had left to go. He could see the start of Exhibition Road on the other side of the gate.

“Whoever it is, is beyond help. Unless you can raise the dead.”

The way she moved her shoulders showed him his opinion wasn’t at all welcome. She reached forward, hesitated, then turned the body over so that the sightless eyes were filling with rain.

It had been a woman, her age impossible to guess, her cause of death likewise. There were so many things she could have died of. A broken heart for one. Sister Madeleine pushed the eyelids down, first one, then the other. She sat hunched on her heels, dejected, defeated.

“We have to go, *babochka*.” He dared to put his hand on her curved back, and she let it rest there for a while, before shrugging him off and rising to her full height.

“I… I just needed to know,” she said. She glanced down, stifled a sob, and walked deliberately around the body.

And for once, Petrovitch knew better than to ask. He cast a glance behind them. Hyde Park was perfectly still. No one but them was

moving.

As soon as they were outside of the gate, the real world struck them with full force. There were people on the pavements and traffic on the roads, and the stench of death was replaced by the familiar tang of sweat and oil.

Petrovitch looked up and saw a strange fear in the nun's eyes. "Stay with me, Sister. Only half a block more, I promise." He took her hand again—properly her hand this time, not her wrist—and joined the queue to cross the road.

The light went green for them, and they got swept along Exhibition Road. Horns sounded behind them, and Petrovitch twisted round to see the reason: the lights all showed red and the junction had seized.

"What? What is it?"

"I'll tell you later. Unless you want to see some really weird shit, we need to get off the street right now." He pushed her in front of him and through the automatic doors to the university.

The first thought he had was that his pass card had probably been destroyed when his jacket had caught fire. His second thought was that untying the bundle in his hand and seeing if it was true or not wasn't going to be a good idea, since he'd have to sort through three different handguns and some night-vision goggles as well.

And there was the small matter that he was dressed like a Roman Catholic priest.

"*Pizdets,*" he said. "Wait here. I'm going to try and get a temporary card."

He gathered up his bluster and took it to the reception desk, where he had his retina rescanned and his photograph taken, and a pass issued in his name.

He called Sister Madeleine over and explained for the third time that no, he really wasn't a priest, but yes, she really was a nun, and that she was his guest. The receptionist made her sign in, and clearly didn't believe a word of it.

As they walked away toward the lifts, a man with a mop and bucket appeared to clear the floor of the lake they'd brought in with them.

He had to show his card twice more: once to get into his building, the next as they got off the lift on the fourth floor.

"At least Pif took me seriously."

"Who?"

"Pif. Doctor Epiphany Ekanobi to most. She's very smart, but she doesn't tend to believe half of what I tell her."

"I would have thought that would make her extra smart."

“Yeah. But she’s guarding something and she needed to know just how important it is.” He stopped outside a door whose only distinguishing feature was a plastic plaque engraved with the numbers four-one-oh. “This is me. Us.”

He kicked the door open with his usual lack of grace and came face to face with Chain’s police special.

In an instant, Sister Madeleine had her own Vatican-approved hand-cannon out.

“*Perestan bit dabayobom,* Chain. Put it away.”

Chain looked over Petrovitch’s shoulder at Sister Madeleine’s drawn weapon. “After you, Sister.”

Neither of them wanted to be the first to move. Petrovitch shook his head and walked around the policeman. “Pif.”

“Hey, Sam. Detective Inspector Chain has been wondering where you were. And,” she said, raising an eyebrow, “why are you dressed as a priest?”

“Because,” he started, then thought better of it. “It’ll keep.” Then he turned his ire on detective and nun. “Will you two knock it off? Get in here and close the *yebani* door, Sister.”

“Sister?” Pif turned to see Sister Madeleine squelch uncertainly into the room. “I’m not sure if that explains everything or nothing.”

“Really, I’m not in the mood. I’ve already had a perfectly good jacket ruined by the *vnebrachnyjj* Paradise militia, and I’m soaked through for the second time today.”

“How’s the heart?”

“It’s not great. If I catch a cold, it’s going to kill me.” Petrovitch dropped the bundle of cloth on the floor and spread it out wide. He laid the guns—his own Beretta, an ageing Israeli Jericho and a newer Norinco knock-off—out in a fan and put the night-vision goggles next to them to dry off. He held up his jacket.

The back had completely burned through. It was a circle of material with a ragged hole. He went through the pockets, retrieved his student card, a credit chip and a single bullet for the Beretta. Then he threw the remains of the jacket at the wall, where it stuck for a moment before sliding down onto the floor.

Chain holstered his gun and looked over Petrovitch’s growing collection.

“You know what I’m going to say, don’t you?”

“And you know what I’ll say in reply. Where were you? Where were you when the lights went out and they were coming at us in the dark? Where were you when I picked up this little *peesa* and shot a man in the face from no more distance than you are from me?”

“I was saving forty people from being driven into the river. What’s your point?”

“That. Precisely. You can’t protect me. When the Metrozone is safe enough that I don’t have to worry about three—count them, three—different gangs trying to send me to hell, I’ll hand over every offensive weapon I own. Do you think I like carrying them around? Do you think I enjoy blowing someone’s brains out in a church? We’ve got to this point because you lost control of the city, and you lost it long ago.” Petrovitch picked up the little Beretta, ejected the magazine into the palm of his hand and inserted the single cartridge. He slammed it back in. “Anything you can say to make it better? Anything at all?”

“I suppose not.”

“Then *pl’uvat na t’eb’a!* What are you good for?”

Chain rubbed at his chin. “You called me, remember? Something about the Oshicoras?”

Petrovitch forced a half-smile onto his face. “Yeah. So I did. Pif, give him the files. No, wait. Don’t.”

Pif looked from Petrovitch to Chain. “Which is it going to be?”

Petrovitch got awkwardly to his feet. “I haven’t eaten a hot meal since yesterday morning. Detective Inspector Chain is going to buy us all lunch. Then we’ll talk about the death of Oshicora senior.”

Chain blinked.

“Have you got time for some lunch, Sister?” Petrovitch picked up the Jericho and slipped it into Pif’s bag.

“You walked me through Hyde Park. I don’t even know if I’m hungry.”

“Then come for the warmth. Hot sweet tea, or whatever it is you British drink. At least let me do for you what you did for me. Get you dry before you go back out.”

She was torn. “I need to phone Father John.”

“Do it after lunch,” suggested Petrovitch.

“Sam, I’ve broken my vow of obedience once today. I can’t go on like this.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

She bit at her lip, and for once looked like the teenager she still was.

“Looks like I’m paying,” said Chain. “Come on, Sister. You can tell me all about it on the way.”

19

They stood in a quiet corner of the kitchen, catering staff busy elsewhere but not around them. She took everything off: robes, armor, piece by piece, until all she was wearing was a skin-tight gray body suit. Her veil came off last, revealing that the sides and front of her head were shaved. What was left of her dark hair cascaded backward between her shoulder blades almost to her waist.

All the while, she stared unblinking at Petrovitch. He was struck both dumb and motionless, his heart beating slow and heavy in his chest.

She struggled into a cook's white coat at least a size too small for her, then gathered everything up to hang in front of the huge catering ovens.

When it came for him to disrobe, he did so behind the industrial-sized dishwasher. He emerged, white-coated too, to be reminded of her, tall and strong and lithe, by her impact armor sitting like a headless soldier on a spare chair.

Back at their table, she kept on stealing Petrovitch's chips.

"I thought you said you weren't hungry."

She looked at him with a gloriously defiant expression, and reached forward again.

"Still counts as food, even if it is from my plate." He speared a whole sausage with his fork and started to eat it from one end.

Chain put down his sandwich and wiped his mouth. "Can someone please tell me why you think Oshicora's dead? It's important, even if you lot are busy filling your faces."

Petrovitch spoke around his mouthful. "Pif, give him the card."

Pif reached past the gun in her bag for the data card and slid it across the table.

"Sam hasn't seen these yet," she said. "They seem authentic."

"Yeah. In my little conversation with Hijo, he all but admitted that he'd put a bullet in Old Man Oshicora's head. Then he told me I was next, which was nice of him." Petrovitch turned his fork and made short work of the other half of the sausage. He lost two more chips to the same predator. "*Chyort!* Get your own!"

"Don't swear at the nun, Petrovitch," said Chain. He got out his handheld computer and slid the card in.

The little computer wheezed and strained, and eventually a tinny voice called out: "I hope this is you, Sam. I really hope it's you. They've killed my father. They dragged him away and they shot him. I heard it even though I wasn't supposed to. I don't know what to do, I don't know where to go, I don't know anyone who can help me.

Except you. You have to save me, Sam, because there's no one else."

Chain looked out of the corner of his eye at Petrovitch, naked but for a catering uniform, chewing on the last piece of sausage.

"What?" said Petrovitch.

A smile flickered on Chain's lips. He tried to squash it, but failed.

Petrovitch swallowed, and turned in his chair. "What? What is it?"

"Help me, Obi-wan Kenobi, you're my only hope," squeaked Chain, and started to laugh.

"*Zatknis na hui, gaishnik*. Did she call the police? No, she didn't. Why? Because she knows they're all as useless as you." Petrovitch examined the tines on his fork and wondered what they'd look like sticking out of Chain's leg.

"Okay, so it's quite sweet she asked you for help, but really, Petrovitch." He snorted. "Get a sense of perspective."

"Detective Inspector," said Pif. She narrowed her eyes and folded her arms. "This man discovered how to make gravity out of electricity yesterday. Don't be too quick to dismiss him."

Petrovitch bared his teeth in a feral grin. "I'll tell you what I told that *raspizdyai* Hijo: I will save her. Just to prove that I can."

Sister Madeleine shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

Chain looked at Pif, then at Petrovitch. He sighed, and played the second file.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

"Get me out of here, I'm begging you, get me out!"

When the electronic feedback screeched, Chain turned the sound off. He stroked his chin. "That was Hijo, pulling her down. Never happen if Hamano Oshicora was still around."

"You don't say?" Petrovitch held out his hand for the computer, and Chain reluctantly handed it over.

He watched it for himself. He knew the content but not the nuances, the way Sonja Oshicora spoke earnestly, stared wide-eyed and steady into the camera. In the first clip, she wasn't pleading with him, she was telling him precisely how it was: she was alone in a sea of confusion, and only he could cut through it and rescue her.

In the second, it was different. Something had gone wrong, and she'd fled to the only safe space she knew—her room inside the tower. She'd locked the door, got out one final message before becoming a prisoner.

But there was a tickle in the back of his mind, worrying him. He played it again while everybody watched him hunch over the screen and not blink.

"She didn't send this message," he said. He looked up with a smile. "No, really. What's the last thing you see?"

Chain reached out for his computer: Petrovitch held it away from him. “Okay, then. Hijo pulling Sonja to the floor.”

“No. After that. Someone points their gun at the computer. That ends the message.”

“I don’t get it.”

“You might send mail by destroying your hardware. I send it by clicking the little send icon, or by saying ‘send,’ or by pressing a key. Sonja did none of those things because she was underneath Hijo. Hijo didn’t do it, either, because he didn’t want the message sent: he was breaking down the door to make sure she couldn’t call for help.”

“So who did send it?”

“I don’t know,” Petrovitch said. “But I know what it means.”

“Someone other than Sonja wanted it sent,” said Sister Madeleine. “Just to show I’m paying attention. This Hijo isn’t in complete control, there’s at least one person loyal to the old leader.”

“Blimey,” said Chain, “no need to labor the point. Even if this was true, even if Hamano Oshicora turns up in the river or propping up a bridge somewhere, I don’t know what you expect me to do about this.”

“Ooh, I don’t know,” wondered Petrovitch, tapping his chin, “maybe you could round up some of your police friends and turn up mob-handed at the Oshicora Tower, set Sonja free and arrest Hijo for murder. What do you think? Sound like something the police might be interested in?”

Chain started to answer, then stopped. He tapped on the table and turned his empty plate around. “I’ll tell you what would happen. I’d go to my boss: I’d say Hamano Oshicora’s been assassinated by one of his trusted lieutenants and has taken Sonja Oshicora hostage. We need to organize an operation to get her out. He’d say, ‘Why? Why on earth should I risk any of my people while Oshicora’s empire is busy imploding?’ That’s what he’d say. He might add, ‘Good riddance,’ and then question my sanity, but that’s about the measure of it.”

“So you’re going to do what you’ve done all along: exactly nothing.”

“Have you seen what’s going on out there at the moment? It’s pissing down with rain with no let-up in sight, your little electronic war with the Oshicoras has infected the whole Metrozone with all sorts of nonsense, and you want me to arrange a bloodbath on the steps of one of the most heavily defended buildings in the city.” Chain snatched his computer back. “Damn right I’m doing nothing. This is a good day for me. I haven’t been able to so much as slow Oshicora down since he turned up. Now he’s gone, and Hijo hasn’t got the smarts to keep it together. I can sit back, kick off my shoes, and watch them fall. No one but them has to get hurt.”

“Sonja’s going to get hurt,” said Petrovitch, “and Hijo wants to kill me.”

“Hijo will be too busy with important things to worry about little you.” Chain slipped the computer away and got up with a scrape of his chair. “As for Sonja, I guess she’s beyond help. Nice meeting you all again. Petrovitch, if you still want the body armor, it’s in the back of my car.”

Petrovitch pretended to think about the offer, then slowly extended his middle finger. “*Za cyun v’zhopu.*”

“Your choice. I’ve done what I could: what you don’t seem to understand is that what I’m allowed to do is limited not just by the law, but by what’s possible.” Chain pulled his coat off the back of the chair and shambled to the door.

Sister Madeleine rose to her feet. Because she was very tall, it took some time. Petrovitch was going to tell her not to bother with Chain, but she had such a look of righteous indignation on her face that he didn’t dare. She strode after the inspector, her long legs eating up the distance between them.

Then it was just him and Pif at the table. Petrovitch pulled off his glasses and tossed them carelessly aside. He rubbed his eyes. “You know, I could do without this.”

“Sam, maybe it’s for the best. We can get back to doing what we’re good at.”

“Yeah. That’d be great, except Hijo’s on my case and I’m not as confident as Chain about his lack of ability. He seems pretty competent to me.” He squinted for his glasses, and toyed with the arms. “That plane flight out of here is looking increasingly attractive.”

“Then take it,” said Pif. “See what it’s like in a few days. Any other university on the planet will take you: all you have to do is wave that sheet of paper I’ve got on my desk at them.”

“It’s your work more than mine. Besides, I’ve got something else to prove now: I said I’d save Sonja Oshicora.”

“It’s a good thing to want to, Sam, but…” Her voice trailed off and she ran her fingers through her beaded hair. “You’re going to get yourself killed.”

“What’s the time?”

Pif glanced at her wrist. “Half twelve.”

“I die in just over an hour’s time anyway.” He saw the look on her face. “Don’t worry. It’s just an admin thing. And I don’t need Chain. I have a plan. It’s not a very good one yet, but it’s a start.”

“Do I want to know?”

“No. No you don’t.”

“Okay.” Pif’s phone chimed, and she reached past the inconveniently large pistol to retrieve it. She frowned at the number,

flipped the cover, and said hesitantly, “Hello?”

Petrovitch looked away to give Pif her privacy. Chain and the sister were in animated conversation over by the door. She was pointing back at Petrovitch, jabbing her finger and leaning over the detective, who in return looked up with an expression of unconcerned passivity.

“That’s… strange,” said Pif. She pressed a button and passed the phone to Petrovitch.

He tore his eyes away from Madeleine and peered at the little screen. She’d brought up the last number to call her.

“One-three-five, seven-one-one, one-three-one, seven-one-nine. That’s not a real number. In fact, that’s,” and he used the only word that could describe it, “strange.”

Petrovitch twisted around. Sister Madeleine was fuming that Chain had taken a call in the middle of their argument. He stood a little way back, computer trapped between ear and shoulder. He said “Who is this?” twice, then cut the connection. He stared at the device.

Almost immediately, the nun’s phone was brought out by one of the kitchen staff from where it had been laid to dry. She moved away from Chain and slipped the phone beside her head.

Petrovitch walked over slowly, still clutching Pif’s phone. He took Sister Madeleine’s wrist down from its height and turned it so he could see if it was the same number.

“There’s no one there,” she said, “not even breathing.”

He leaned in and she pressed the speaker against him. It was just dead air, not even the hiss of an open microphone or a digital click. Then the line fell dead.

He straightened up and searched the ceiling of the restaurant. There were cameras in each of the four corners, and another over the door. There were half a dozen other people eating; the place was usually busier.

“I think someone’s trying to contact me,” said Petrovitch.

“Why don’t they just call you?”

“I don’t have a phone. I know I must be the last person in the Metrozone not to have one, but there you are. I’ve never needed one. I’ve no one to talk to.” Petrovitch pushed his glasses up his face and glanced across at Chain. “One-three-five, seven-one-one, one-three-one, seven-one-nine?”

He nodded. “You know the number?”

“Yeah. Just never expected to see them like this. I’m going to get my clothes on before I’m forced to run naked from the building chased by ninjas, which is probably where this is going.”

Petrovitch forced a smile at the kitchen staff as he raced around, picking up his boots, socks, trousers, pants, T-shirt. He struggled into

his trousers and put his warm, stiff boots on. Then he waved his goodbyes, still wearing the white coat and carrying what he hadn't put on under his arm.

"Pif? Phone." He threw it across the table at her. "Keep the gun."

"Sam?"

"Back to the lab. I've just remembered I can be contacted."

"The mail servers are down, though." She put the phone in her bag and slung it over her shoulder.

"I still got in touch with you, didn't I? Good old-fashioned copper wire."

The pair headed for the doors, and Chain barred their way.

"You have to explain," he said.

"If you weren't such a *kon pedal'nii*, you'd have worked it out." Petrovitch darted to one side, Pif the other.

She shouted back, "First eight primes," just before the doors swung shut again.

"You told him!"

"Your tame nun wanted to know, too."

"She is not my anything."

"Oh, Sam. I saw the way you looked at her. And she at you."

He stopped in the middle of the corridor, and she stopped too.

"Never," he said, "speak about this again."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

They ran the rest of the way, except for the lift, which was filled with her panting and his soft groans.

When the lift door opened, they could both hear the landline ringing. The security guard caught the barest glimpse of their cards as they dashed by.

The phone was on Pif's desk, warbling away in its turn-of-the-century monotone. Pif closed the door and leaned back against it, while Petrovitch stalked over and regarded the handset with suspicion.

"Just pick it up," she said.

Petrovitch curled his fingers around the phone and lifted it to his head. The silence rang louder than the noise.

"Petrovitch," he said, and waited.

"*Shinkansen ha mata hashirou.*"

He opened his mouth, then slowly closed it again. He motioned for a pen. "Can you repeat that for me?"

"*Shinkansen ha mata hashirou,*" said the voice in a perfectly measured tone. Exactly as before.

Petrovitch bit the pen lid off and scribbled what he thought he

heard on the nearest piece of paper. “How do I contact you?” he asked, staring at his writing, trying to make sense of it.

He heard the burr of the dial tone, and the handset slipped from his fingers. It bounced on its coiled cord off the edge of the desk, then dangled there until Pif picked it up and put it back.

“Who was it?” she asked.

“This,” he said, “this word here. I recognize it. And the only time I’ve heard it before is from a man who’s supposed to be dead.”

20

They'd gone out onto the campus and hunted down a native Japanese speaker, pinning the startled student against a wall and shouting badly accented words at him until he confessed: the bullet train will run again.

"It could be a rallying cry," said Pif.

"It's not a very good one: not up there with *Viva la revolucion!* or *For the motherland!* What's wrong with *Banzai?*"

"Because the Emperor is dead and Japan has gone forever?"

"Oshicora used these exact same words: the *shinkansen* will run again. It might have been something he told everyone. So now it's being used by the Oshicora loyalists as a code word that they can recognize each other by. If that's true, I can use that." Petrovitch worried at the piece of paper he'd written on. It was crumpled and creased and dog-eared. "I need to make a call."

"Is that code too? Code for please leave?"

"Yeah. But more for your benefit than mine." Petrovitch wheeled his chair around his desk and across the floor. "I'm smart, right? Everyone says so."

"Smart and wise are two different things, Sam." She pushed the phone toward him.

"And so are safe and honorable." He picked up the handset and listened. No Japanese this time. "If it was you, stuck in that tower, your mother long dead, your father freshly murdered, no way out: wouldn't you want someone to help you?"

"Of course," said Pif, "although you have to admit you'd want that someone to be… I don't know."

"Not me, you mean."

"Not really." She pressed her fingers into her forehead. "The only language you speak fluently is mathematics. So what's the probability of you pulling this off? What's the probability of you throwing your life away for nothing?"

"That's why I'm about to swing the odds in my favor." He closed his eyes, trying to see the number he'd displayed on Chain's computer while he was supposed to be busy watching Sonja's messages. "Yeah, that's it."

He dialed, and heard ringing.

Then someone picked up and said: "*Da?*"

"Comrade Marchenkho? It's Petrovitch. Don't put the phone down, because we need to talk."

He lifted the earpiece slightly away from his head as Marchenkho vented his diseased spleen at him down the line.

"Oshicora's dead," said Petrovitch when he could get a word in.

"How do you know?"

"His daughter told me. You know of Hijo?"

"*Da.*"

"Killed his boss. Took control. Occupational hazard for you lot, I suppose. How's Yuri? Not got an itchy trigger finger yet?"

Marchenkho rumbled. "He says to remind you that his name is Grigori. What is it that you want, Petrovitch?"

"Apart from giving you the glad tidings that your greatest rival has been eliminated? How many men do you have, Marchenkho?"

"Enough," he said. "Women too."

"Good, because I want to borrow them. And you too, if you want to come for the ride. We're going to finish off the Oshicora Corporation once and for all."

"And when do you propose this happens?"

"That depends. Tomorrow morning good for you?"

Afterward, he started sorting his desk, putting everything into neat piles by subject and looking through his old notebooks, seeing if there was anything else he needed to write.

"Convince me you're coming back," said Pif.

"Can't. Dead man walking now."

She sighed, and leafed through her own papers, and held up his earlier work. "This is going to be called the Petrovitch Solution, after the man who first discovered it. But I don't want this to be the only thing the world remembers him for."

"Most people don't even manage this: having an equation named after you is immortality."

"Sam…"

He sat back and stroked his nose. "How long have we known each other, Pif?"

"Two years. Roughly."

"Those are two years that I stole from someone. I cheated them by living. And for the few years before that. Hang on." Petrovitch found his bug-detecting wand and made a search of the room. He realized he should have done this before: Chain had had plenty of opportunity to plant one of his bugs earlier.

The lights on the wand flickered into the red as he moved it over his desk.

"Did Chain sit here?"

"Yes. Yes, I think so, while we were waiting for you."

"*Chyort.*" He got down on his hands and knees and looked underneath the tabletop. A sticky square of electronics was adhered to the wood toward the back. He got an edge up with a nail, then peeled

it off. He emerged with it stuck to his thumb. “What do I have to say to you, Detective Inspector Harry Chain? You collect all this information, you work out what’s going on, you plot and you plan. And yet nothing you do—that you say that you’re allowed to do—makes any difference. You’ve had all the chances you needed and you chose not to take them, any of them, you spineless shriveled little man. You are a pathetic waste of space and, unlike me, the world will forget you because you have never really lived. Goodbye.”

Taking a pair of scissors, he cut the bug in two and flicked the halves into his bin.

“I never knew you were so eloquent.”

“And all without the aid of vodka.” Petrovitch sat down again and threw the now-inert wand into the clear space on his desk. “Now where was I?”

“Cheating and stealing,” she said.

“Yeah. In the life I had before, I stole some money. It’s a little more complicated than that, though. My employer—my patron is a better word—was a man called Boris. He and his gang kidnapped rich people and ransomed them. They used me for technical support and in return I got books and somewhere warm and lit to read them. It was terrifying for the hostages, but it was fine for me. Fine, while the companies and trusts these people worked for paid up. Boris was okay as brutal thugs went: he kept his word. Probably the only good thing he taught me.”

Pif’s eyes were growing larger. “Sam!”

“It was St. Petersburg in the aftermath of Armageddon. I needed to be able to do something where having a weak heart wasn’t going to be a problem. My father died of radiation poisoning early on, and I needed not to be a burden on my mother and sister. I could even help out occasionally. If things went well, Boris was generous. Generous enough to keep the police sweet and ensure that no one ever betrayed him. Then it all started to go wrong. Some companies wouldn’t pay up anymore. Boris killed hostages and threw bodies in the river. Not a good time.”

“I’m going to make some coffee,” announced Pif. “I’m not sure I want to hear the end of this.”

“For me? Please. I can promise you it gets better.”

She looked at him on her way to the kettle. “Why now, Sam?”

“Because if I die, this story dies with me.”

“Go on.”

“There was this man. An American called Dalton. Rich, didn’t take much care. Boris took him, asked for ten million U.S., I think. Dalton’s company had a no-pay policy, so he was going to die when the money didn’t turn up.” Petrovitch looked up at the ceiling and

blew out a thin stream of air. “I saved him.”

“Okay, that’s a good thing.”

“I took all his savings in return for keeping him alive.”

“That’s slightly more morally ambivalent.”

“And of course, I cheated Boris too. Samuil Petrovitch is a construct, the man I wanted to become. He’s three years older than I am, for a start. I don’t have a degree. I don’t have a scholarship. The money I’m using to fund my extravagant lifestyle is the money I stole from Dalton.”

Pif, her back to Petrovitch, poured boiling water on the coffee granules. “So what happened to him? The American?”

“He went home. He got married. He has kids, two of them, both genetically enhanced. He got his new life. And I got mine. I think, under the circumstances, we both got a good deal.”

The spoon went round and round the mug, making little scraping noises as it went. “You’ve never been to university.”

“Not until this one.”

“So how come you’re so brilliant at what you do?”

Petrovitch took it as a compliment. “Raw natural ability. I can’t claim credit for that. But I did a lot of reading—more than a lot. Not just magnetohydrodynamics, but across the field. There are problems that I find solutions for in the strangest places. You can’t know it all, but it helps if you know where to look.”

She brought both coffees over, and put one mug into his grateful hands. “None of this explains why you’re so willing to throw it all away.”

“Doesn’t it go some way to explain why I hold it lightly, though? The last few years have been a gift. I didn’t deserve this, this peace I’ve had, the space to do what I want without having to worry about money or guns. It’s over now. Even if Hijo and his assassins don’t get me, Chain will end up waving a pair of handcuffs and an extradition order at me.”

“It doesn’t have to be over. You can run again.”

“It was over the moment I grabbed Sonja Oshicora’s hand. The moment, I suppose, when I decided to stop running and spit in the face of destiny. This is meant to be, all the crap that’s happening. That I managed to hold it off for so long is a miracle in itself.” Petrovitch leaned over his coffee, strong, hot, bitter: she knew how he liked it. “Now’s the time to make a stand, no matter how suicidal it is.”

Pif sighed. She wasn’t convinced. “Is there no one who’ll miss you? You said you had a sister, a mother.”

“Not contacting them ever again was the price I had to pay for Boris leaving them alone. I never told them what I was doing, and they never asked. I disappeared. They thought I was dead, and I’ve

given them no reason to suppose otherwise. Apart from that, no. I've made no friends, had no girlfriends, I've maybe a handful of acquaintances. No one's going to miss me." He took a mouthful of coffee, almost too hot to drink, and thought of his last sight of Sister Madeleine. "No one."

"Then how are you different from Inspector Chain?" Pif balanced her mug on a rough pile of his lab notes and knelt down in front of the desk. She rested her elbows on the edge and cradled her face in her hands.

"He was given the responsibility and powers of a policeman. What's he done with them? I got given the single opportunity to save Dalton, and what did I do? That he's walking around, living and breathing, spawning little Reconstructionists, is down to me. No one else. So yeah. I'm different from that lazy *sooksin*."

"Is this what it's like, then?" she said, eyes closed, dreaming. "People like us, we think differently, don't we? We are different. We do all the things that others do. We go out to parties and concerts, we go to conferences and drink and talk, we play music and games and we laugh and cry. But when it comes down to it, we don't actually need anyone else. We're happy doing what we do and having obligations interferes with that. Does that make us selfish, or something else?"

"I don't know. To them, I guess it is selfish. Me? I just have such a monstrous sense of self, I don't need to feel love. I don't even feel lonely." He watched Pif's hair beads swinging slightly in time with her breathing. "Sometimes I wonder what it might be like. To be with someone, well, who isn't me. And sometimes I think we don't even need ourselves. What's most important is to find out whether we're right or not."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I've run out of places to go. I can't go home. I can't travel on the tube with the guns. I don't think I can walk to Regent's Park: it's madness on the streets today. And I still don't think any of that was my fault." Petrovitch swilled his coffee around inside his mug and watched the play of light against the black surface. "It's against the rules, but I'll camp down here tonight and meet Marchenkho in the morning."

"I've got a better idea," said Pif. "Come back to my room. I'll cook something. We'll break open a bottle of something pretending to be wine. We can talk about work and play computer games until it's stupid late, and you can crash out on the couch. Once I've done some tidying up, that is. I'm not used to guests."

Petrovitch looked up. "That would be… that would be nice. You have remembered that Hijo is trying to kill me?"

“Let him come. There are paycops on the door, and if he bribes them, well, we’re ready.”

“We?”

She got to her feet and pulled the Jericho out of her bag. Then in a few deft moves, she’d stripped it down to its component parts. “You see,” she said, “where I grew up, in the expensive part of Lagos, we had to protect ourselves from people like you.”

She reassembled the gun just as efficiently and, when she was done, she assumed a shooter’s stance; legs apart, arms braced, good eye over the sights.

“I wasn’t expecting that,” said Petrovitch.

“And neither will they.” She flicked the safety catch on and dropped the gun back in her bag. She smiled.

21

He woke with a start, in unfamiliar surroundings. The blanket wasn't his, and neither were the cushions he'd left slack-jawed drool on. The Norinco was under his left hand, resting on his belly.

He was at Pif's. She was at the other end of the sofa, in an attitude much like his, but a lot less troubled. One of her feet was jammed between his hip and the upholstery, and her hand draped artfully from under her stark white duvet, pointing at the—her, he supposed now—Jericho.

The gun had joined the debris on the floor. Stained plates, mugs marked with dribbles of red wine, two handsets for her games console, shoes, socks, their trousers, her jumper, paper, books, disks, cartridges, memory sticks, coins, paperclips, cards.

There had to be a clock somewhere—at least something with a built-in clock, when Petrovitch's myopic search of the walls revealed nothing. His glasses had to be close at hand, but he was reluctant to swing his legs off their perch in case he trod on them.

He patted the carpet, found nothing, then reached back over his head and knocked against a low table. There. He jammed them on his face.

The blank screen of the TV held no clues, but at least he could see the remote. He snagged it and pressed the on and mute buttons simultaneously.

Pif stirred, wrinkling her nose and creasing her forehead.

He couldn't get a channel. He scrolled through all of them, one to one hundred, and there was nothing but snow.

"Pif?" he said, touching her toes. "Pif, are you on cable or broadcast?"

Her eyelids flickered open, and she made smacking noises with her mouth. "Cable."

"It wasn't off last night. It is now."

"Oh." She started to close her eyes again. "Do I remember you saying that it wasn't your fault?"

"It's not. I don't see how it can be."

"Can't you call your bot-net off?"

"Yeah. I could, if I had access. If I had my rat, I could get on through a satellite." He still didn't know the time. "The attack should have fallen apart by now."

"Worried?"

"Some. And not just about the netcops coming calling." Petrovitch cleared a space for his feet and pulled the blanket around him. He put his gun on the table. "At least Hijo didn't make an appearance."

"Hmm," she said sleepily.

There was a clock on her microwave. He stood up, taking the blanket with him to cover his bare legs, and picked his way into the kitchen area. He stared at the blue glowing lights.

"I'm going to have to go. Marchenkho is one of those people who you really don't want to be late for."

"You walking?"

"I'm feeling better, and it's not like it's far. And it's not really something you can call a cab for." He retrieved his trousers and struggled into them. "Oshicora Tower, please, and hurry: I'm in an armed gang and we're storming it this morning."

"Just thinking about your heart."

"It's not like I need it, long-term." He pulled his socks on and started to lace up his boots.

Pif stretched and shuffled to a sitting position. "You want anything else? A coffee?"

"My adrenaline will do just fine. Umbrella?"

"There's one by the door. Somewhere."

"I'll find it if I need it."

"Do you suppose it's still raining?"

"I can't imagine there's any more rain left in the sky." Petrovitch moved to the window and twitched the curtain. Outside was balanced between night and day. He looked up to the underside of the sky, and caught the red glow from the base of the clouds; looked down to see the shining courtyard below, bounded by four slabs of window-pierced concrete.

"Don't throw your life away, Sam. Make someone take it from you. Make it expensive." She held out the butt of the Jericho to him.

"Keep it, just in case. Anyway, I've only got two hands." It was time to go. He picked up the Norinco and eased it into his waistband. The Beretta he stuffed low into his sock. "Maybe I'll see you around?"

"Last chance to back out," she said, resting her chin on the arm of the sofa.

"I'm so far past last chances that last chance is nothing but a dot in the distance behind me." Petrovitch stepped across the floor like he was picking his way through a minefield. He put his hand on the doorknob. "Lock it when I've gone."

There didn't seem to be anything else to say, so he left.

Outside in the corridor, he leaned his head against the cool white wall and took a steadying breath. If he'd been in his own domik, he wouldn't have been alone. There would have been corridor dwellers or shift workers or whores or dealers or muggers. In a student accommodation block with paycops on the doors downstairs, his were the only footsteps he heard as he skipped down the stairwell.

Living like Pif did, insulated from the outside, in a place which didn't stink of rust and mold, where your neighbors weren't plotting to kill you and take your space—it was different.

And for Petrovitch, who'd always clung by his fingernails to the edge of existence, it came as a revelation. He'd deliberately chosen the domiks over this bright, clean, warm life. The corner of his mouth twitched with the realization that perhaps he'd made a mistake.

The paycop on the door let him out with a grunt. The screen on his desk was a storm of static.

Suddenly, it was cold. The damp dawn air goosebumped the flesh on his bare arms, and he regretted the loss of his jacket. Thought followed thought; he'd lost a lot more than just a piece of clothing. He hunched his back against the weather, and set off across the campus.

There was one more airlock of comfortable warmth to enter. He passed through the foyer, showed his singed student card to those on duty, and hesitated at the main doors.

Something was wrong, and it took him a moment to see what it was. The street outside was all but deserted, and he'd never seen it like that before. He turned to the guards, who seemed to have caught the same sense of disquiet as he had. They huddled close together at the reception desk, talking quietly amongst themselves and casting the occasional glance through the windows.

A car, two cars, went by with their headlights blue-white bright, but then nothing. The pavements, the same ones that he was used to grinding his way along everyday, were wet with moisture that reflected the street lights. There were people, just not enough of them for him to feel comfortable. He'd stick out, exposed in plain sight.

The clock on the wall clicked to eleven minutes past six. He was going to be late. He felt the cold press of the gun at the base of his spine, the weight on his right ankle.

He tapped the door mechanism. "What's the worst that can happen?" he said to himself as he waited, and waited, for the door to open. After a while, he shoved at it instead, and eventually it wheezed aside enough for him to slip out.

The cold returned, and he assumed his usual head-down posture for the road.

Except that it was impossible to maintain. There were too few pedestrians. He felt compelled to look at them, commit the cardinal sin of making eye contact for a brief moment as they passed. Everyone had the same expression, one that showed that deep down, no matter their bluff, they were afraid.

Petrovitch could only assume that his eyes held that same fear.

He crossed the road, walking at a diagonal. In all his years in the Metrozone, he'd never done such a thing. He passed darkened shops

that he couldn't remember ever closing. Their signs were illuminated, but inside was gray gloom.

He turned out of Exhibition Road, turned right. Across, on the other side, was Hyde Park, just as still as it had been yesterday. Yet today, it wasn't the stillness of death that emanated from the miasma. It was the silence of a held breath.

It wasn't only the city that was waiting for something to happen. Petrovitch pushed his hands up inside his T-shirt sleeves, and hurried along to Hyde Park corner.

Marchenkho wasn't there, and Petrovitch had no watch or phone to tell him the right time. He could be late, or early. The only thing he was certain of was that he had the right day. So he stood under the Wellington Arch while a dozen vaguely human-shaped piles of bags and blankets slept around him, making the most of the shelter.

In the distance, he heard the sound of bells ringing the half-hour. Now Marchenkho was late. He jumped up and down and swung his hands around, both trying to keep warm and wishing to evaporate the cold sweat that had broken out across his body. He shivered.

In the distance, coming up Grosvenor Place, was a line of black cars. At first, he thought it another strange computer-directed aberration, but then he saw more clearly. The cars, six of them, circled the monument once, and then parked up against the curb.

People, Slavs like himself, slowly emerged into the dawn air, well wrapped up to conceal their firearms. Petrovitch made sure both his hands were on show as he approached.

"Hey, Yuri."

Grigori narrowed his eyes and raised his chin. "Petrovitch. I lose, then."

"What?"

"I bet fifty euros you wouldn't show." He leaned against his limousine and knocked on the rear window. It slid down.

"*Dobroe utro, tovarish.*"

Petrovitch peered in. "Yeah. I can't believe you have a Zil."

"Why not?" said Marchenkho. "Zil is a good car. Reliable. Armor plated."

"Parts must be a bitch." Petrovitch ran his hand across the polished, waxed roof, leaving a trail of sticky fingerprints.

"With money, anything is possible." Marchenkho stroked his mustache. "Are you armed?"

"You don't bring a knife to a gunfight."

"This is good. What do you need?"

"Nine millimeter for the Norinco. Point three two for the Beretta."

Marchenkho nodded to Grigori, who went to the boot of the car and opened it, revealing neatly labeled cartons and long cases.

“Petrovitch, aren’t you cold?”

“I’m freezing my tits off, truth be told. My jacket got incinerated by the Paradise militia.”

“What did you do to them, that they would set your clothing on fire?”

Petrovitch stamped hard on the ground. “It’s a long, and probably pointless story. They weren’t after me, anyway.”

“Getting caught up in other people’s battles again? I thought you were supposed to be a smart man.” His mustache twitched as he smiled mirthlessly. “So many enemies for one so young.”

Grigori handed him two small cardboard cartons, heavy with bullets. He watched as Petrovitch tried to find somewhere on him to put them, then shrugged off his long black leather coat.

“Here,” he said.

Petrovitch looked blankly at him. “I can’t do that,” he said when he finally realized.

“I have more coats, more clothes, suits, shoes, jeans, than I can ever wear. Take it. Look on it as an example of socialism in action.” Grigori draped it over Petrovitch’s shoulders. The collar smelled of cologne.

“You look fit to be in my company now,” said Marchenkho. “Get in.”

Petrovitch dropped a carton into each of the side pockets of his coat, and pulled it around him as he slid onto the long backseat.

There were three people opposite him: two men and a woman, each cradling a Kalashnikov.

“Leon, Valentina, Ziv. This is the kid I told you about.”

“Yeah. Whatever he said was a lie.” Petrovitch slid the Beretta from his sock and sprung the clip.

The woman called Valentina shook her ponytail. “He said you were fearless.”

Petrovitch looked across at Marchenkho. “Does that mean you like me?”

“It means I have decided not to kill you. This is good, no?” Marchenkho glanced down at the little pistol Petrovitch was busy reloading. “Your *peesa* is very small.”

“That’s what the other guy said, just before I killed him.”

Marchenkho shook with laughter. “See? See how he looks like a kitten but roars like a lion.”

The driver’s door slammed, and Grigori started the Zil.

“Tell me,” said Marchenkho. “What happened to your American friend?”

“Sorenson? I don’t know. Oshicora screwed him over, and then Inspector Chain did the same thing, only worse.”

“But Oshicora is dead.”

“Sorenson won’t know. If he’s gone feral, he’ll never find out. He’ll spend the rest of his days hiding from someone who no longer exists.” Petrovitch tucked the Beretta in his pocket, and reached around for the Norinco. “I guess I might know what that’s like.”

“Perhaps you can find him, when we have done what we came to do.” Marchenkho nodded to dour Ziv, who tapped Grigori on the shoulder. The car pulled away and started down Piccadilly.

“Did you have any problems this morning?” asked Petrovitch. He fed fat bullets into the Norinco’s magazine.

“Why? What do you know?” Marchenkho stroked his chin, and leaned over, resting his solid bulk against Petrovitch’s shoulder. He radiated menace.

Petrovitch slapped the magazine back home and rested the gun on his knees. He chose his words carefully. “Something’s happening. I don’t know what. I can’t say I like it.”

And just like that, the Ukrainian changed moods. He rumbled deep in his chest. “My mobile refuses to connect. My computer cannot talk to others. My breakfast is accompanied by white noise, not the news. This is not good. But the streets are clear. The cameras are off. Even if this is for just one day, it could not be better. We are the Lords of Misrule, and there will be no one to see the mischief we make. Once we are done here, Oshicora has other operations in the East End that we wish to see closed down.”

Grigori was slowing, making a big U-turn in front of the Oshicora Tower, the other cars blocking the road in front and behind, screeching tires, disgorging people.

A shabby figure in a brown trenchcoat looked balefully at them from the curbside.

“Yeah, should have mentioned this earlier.” Petrovitch waited for the Zil to stop, then opened the door. “Chain might have overheard us talking.”

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Chain frowned as guns and people spilled out onto the pavement. He turned to Petrovitch with an expression like a cross tortoise. “You don’t think you’re going to get away with this, do you?” he said.

“As has been pointed out,” said Petrovitch, “today is the only day we’ll get away with this.” He swirled his coattails and admitted that it did look pretty cool. “Do you think you can stop us?”

“I came to try.”

“Yeah,” grinned Petrovitch, “you and whose army?”

“Oh very droll. I appreciate you’re resourceful but it won’t save you.” Chain fished around in his pockets and found his own gun. “I should arrest you right now.”

Petrovitch reached behind him for the Norinco. “Maybe you should, but you can stand to wait until later.”

“I suppose I could,” admitted Chain with a shrug. “Perhaps it’s time I cut you some slack.”

Marchenkho stood beside Petrovitch and slapped him hard on the back. “All friends now? This is good.”

“About all this,” said Chain, “I don’t have the manpower to rescue Sonja Oshicora: you know that, don’t you?”

“We do,” said Petrovitch.

“So, let’s get on with it.” Chain patted his pockets for his police card. He flipped it open and tucked it facing outward from his top pocket. “Has one of you got a plan?”

Marchenkho looked at Chain, then at Petrovitch. “Of course,” he growled. “What sort of half-assed organization do you think I run?”

Petrovitch shrugged. “I had the idea that I was just going to walk up to the front desk and start the revolution from there. If it goes *pizdets,* we do it the old-fashioned way: straight down the middle, lots of smoke.”

“And you have some reason to believe that might work?” Chain looked up and down the height of the Oshicora Tower.

“Yeah. Yeah, I do. I’m doing the talking, though.” Petrovitch flicked the Norinco’s safety to off.

“Wait, wait,” said Marchenkho, waving his large hands. “This will not do. My people cannot see me stay behind while you walk to the tower. It’s no good. Grigori, walkie-talkie.”

Grigori placed the fist-sized device in Marchenkho’s upturned palm.

“You come when called, *da?*” He waited for Grigori to nod. “No hanging around like some *krisha* who takes my money and does nothing for it.”

"Now can we go?" said Petrovitch. "It's not getting any earlier."

He strode off across the plaza. The fountains that should have played with the early morning light were still, just pools of trembling water. Aware of the other two men behind him, he kept his gaze on the tower.

There were no guards on the door, and there should have been, no matter what time of day it was. He anticipated being challenged, each and every step he took closer. Or was it going to be a sniper on a neighboring rooftop instead?

"I never thought I'd say this," said Chain, trotting up beside him, "but it's too quiet."

"What have you heard, Chain? What's going on? And don't say this is all my fault."

"I don't believe that anymore. I do know that the Metrozone Authority is shutting everything off in stages and starting again from the ground up. We have a couple of hours, tops. After that, everything will be live again."

"It's going to take longer than that to get it all working. Everything's connected, Chain. There just has to be one wrong thing somewhere and it gets everywhere." Petrovitch glanced behind him, past the striding bulk of Marchenkho. Figures were spreading out across the concourse, ducking down behind the abstract granite shapes and crouching behind the lips of pools. "Why is there no one out front?"

"One of two reasons. One of which is that they're not expecting us."

"The other being that they are. Marchenkho, how tight is your *organitskaya?*"

"We are all comrades together. We all have as much to gain or lose as the next man. *Da?*" The Ukrainian's olive-green greatcoat flapped as he walked, flashing the presence of his shoulder holster. "Since the last purge, we have stayed secure."

"That doesn't fill me with confidence." Petrovitch pressed his glasses hard up on his nose. "Can you see anyone inside?"

The reception area was in darkness, but they were close enough to make out vague shapes moving against the glass doors; a hand, a face.

"I've seen this before. So have you, Petrovitch." Chain started to jog toward the tower.

"What does he mean?" asked Marchenkho, holding Petrovitch's arm.

"Come with me and I'll show you."

They caught up with the detective as the tower darkened the sky. It became all too clear that there were people trapped inside; some of

the glass panels had starred through attempts to break them, and the reflections of the three men distorted as the doors were shaken. But there seemed to be no way out.

"*Hivno!*" grunted Marchenkho and put his hand on his gun. "Some answers, now."

"If it's computer controlled, it's gone wrong."

Chain pressed his police card to the glass. "Back off," he shouted. "I'm going to try and shoot my way in."

"That won't work," said Petrovitch. "But if you insist, let me take cover before the ricochet drills a neat hole in my skull."

Those inside crushed themselves tighter to be near to Chain. He couldn't shoot even if he wanted to. "Got a better idea?"

"I do," said Marchenkho. He spoke into his walkie-talkie. "Grigori? We need Tina and her box of tricks."

Meanwhile, Petrovitch was shoving Chain out of the way. "Not like that. Like this." He got level with the staring eyes of one frantic *sarariman* and said haltingly: "*Shinkansen ha mata hashirou.*"

"What?" said Chain. "What did you say?"

"*Zatknis!*" Petrovitch pushed him away again, raised his voice and repeated. "*Shinkansen ha mata hashirou.*"

The man inside blinked for the first time. He turned away, his face losing definition behind the smoked glass. Then he came back and nodded, mouthing "*hai.*"

Valentina slid a steel briefcase onto the floor next to him. She clicked the catches with her long fingers and opened the lid.

"Nice," said Petrovitch, inspecting the contents.

"Do your job. Get them away from the doors." She busied herself with a lump of plastic explosive, forming it into a disc in her hands.

Petrovitch mimed what the woman was intending to do, including the explosion that would follow. They didn't understand until she started pressing detonators into the gray wads of plastique she'd stuck to where she hoped the opening mechanism was. Then they moved in a clump, all clutching at each other, as far as the banked reception desks.

"Ready," she said, briefcase in one hand, roll of thin wire in the other. She trotted toward the first fountain, trailing cable behind her. Marchenkho, Chain and Petrovitch followed, and squatted down next to her behind the hard cover.

"You do remember you're just supposed to blow the doors off, don't you?" said Chain, and received a withering look in response.

"Amateurs," muttered Valentina, and opened her briefcase again for the battery pack. She wired in the loose ends of cable and flipped the safety cover off the big red button. "Cover your ears," she said.

She pressed the button, and the silence was broken by the sound

of a single handclap, magnified out of all proportion. The air stiffened and relaxed, now tainted with a burnt chemical odor.

They peered over the parapet. At first, the doors were obscured by smoke; then, as it cleared, it seemed that the door, and its glass was still in place.

Slowly, gracefully, the frame fell outward and landed with a second concussion on the paving slabs. Still the glass didn't break.

"Excellent, Tina," said Marchenkho, and he stood up, pulling out his gun in one fluid motion. "Come on. You want to live forever?"

"Good point, well made," said Petrovitch, and he held the Norinco high. They ran for the doors as those now freed streamed out, coughing from the fumes.

As they emerged, they scattered. They ran as if from the devil.

"Catch one," called Petrovitch, and he watched as Marchenkho straight-armed a middle-aged man in the face. He'd barely hit the floor before he'd been hauled up to tiptoe by his tie. "Not quite what I meant, but yeah, okay."

Blood was streaming down the man's face from his nose, staining his crumpled shirt. He was almost incoherent with terror.

"Where's Sonja Oshicora?" asked Petrovitch.

The man stared at him, at Marchenkho, at the building he'd just left at such speed. Japanese phrases dribbled from his lips, none of which Petrovitch could hope to understand.

"Sonja Oshicora. Where is she? Which floor is she on?"

Marchenkho drew his fist back for another strike, and finally the man seemed scared enough of being beaten to talk. "Miss Sonja gone."

"Gone? Dead?"

"Not dead. Gone. In night."

"Where did Hijo take her?"

The man focused on Petrovitch, and explained the best he could while being choked. "Not Hijo-san. Miss Sonja run away. Hijo-san look for Miss Sonja in city."

Petrovitch pushed his glasses up. "She escaped? When?"

"In night. This night."

"*Pizdets*. Put him down and let him go."

Marchenkho dropped the man, who scrambled to his feet and ran as fast as he could away toward Piccadilly. "She is not there?"

"Apparently she didn't need our help after all." Petrovitch watched the suited man go, then turned back to the Oshicora Tower. "Doesn't explain what's going on in there, though."

"Shall we see?" Marchenkho squared his shoulders and stepped through the doorway into the foyer. Chain was already picking his way through the objects that had been unsuccessfully used to try and batter a way out—chairs, tables, fire extinguishers, metal supports,

earthenware pots with spilled soil and broken trunks.

"They panicked." He kicked a broken tabletop aside. "Wouldn't have happened with Oshicora still alive."

"It probably wouldn't have happened with Hijo still in the building, either."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I bet he's taken all the men with guns out onto the street to look for Sonja, who's escaped all on her own. I'm sorry, gentlemen. I seem to have wasted your time."

Marchenkho holstered his gun and put his hands on his hips. "No, *tovarisch*. I would have paid good money to see this. My only regret is that I did not bring a bomb big enough to demolish the whole building."

"I might have drawn the line at that," said Chain. "So are we sure this place is empty? On a normal day, there would have been a thousand *nikkeijin* here."

Petrovitch shrugged. "They might still be struggling to work from wherever they live. Imagine their surprise when they finally get here." He cocked his head, and listened.

"I hear it too," said Marchenkho.

"It's the lifts." Petrovitch held his gun out in front of him and moved stealthily around the reception area. The row of blank lift doors behind it hummed with movement.

"Why are there no lights, but these have power?" Chain drew his own pistol and watched the floor indicators above each door flicker and change.

Marchenkho squashed the talk button on his walkie-talkie. "Grigori. Squad to the foyer. Now."

"The thing is, are those numbers going up or down?" Petrovitch's question was answered by chimes, one after another, as every lift reached the ground floor. "And why are we standing here, waiting to find out?"

The doors opened simultaneously and, at first, none of them could comprehend what they were looking at: in each lift, there was an uneven mass of cloth and pale flesh, like a jumbled pile of shop mannequins. Then the pooled blood started to seep out across the threshold and onto the pale stone floor. The dark red stain flowed outward, merging, growing.

"I think it's time for us to go," said Petrovitch in a whisper.

Grigori skidded to a halt behind them, the barrel of his Kalashnikov searching for a target.

"A tactical change of plan," said Marchenkho. "Retreat."

Petrovitch waited for a few seconds before joining them, spending that time imagining the final moments of those trapped as they fell the

full height of the lift shaft, the instant that tangled freefall became killing impact.

"Petrovitch! Move!" shouted Chain.

But he didn't. He was busy realizing that every lift would have had to collect people from every floor, then taken them back to the top to drop them to their deaths. It was a deliberate act. Someone had murdered them all.

"*Oi!*"

"Yeah. Coming." The lake of blood had reached his toes, and as he backed away, he left sticky footprints behind him in a trail, all the way outside.

23

Marchenkho had brought vodka as well as guns. A tray was laden with glasses and the bottle was upended over it. The sharp alcohol fumes burned the sweet, heavy smell of blood from their noses.

Petrovitch threw his glass into the gutter like a good Russian, and Marchenkho's crew followed suit to prove they were better Ukrainians.

"If anyone has an explanation for this, I would very much like to hear it." Marchenkho went back for a second glass and shuddered as he drank.

"The building attacked them," said Petrovitch, and suddenly all eyes were on him. Self-conscious under all the attention, he adjusted his glasses. "It lured them into the lifts and then killed them."

"Buildings do not…"

"Yeah," interrupted Petrovitch, "and cars don't do that either, except they did yesterday. If you have a better idea, then let's hear it."

Marchenkho rumbled to himself. "Someone must be controlling the lifts, to make them do that." He was shaken, the man who had committed his own calculated atrocities.

"The same person who was controlling the cars, blocking the internet, the phones, paralyzing the tube? They'd have to be very busy. Superhumanly busy." He shook his head. "Virus. Some sort of virus."

"Viruses do not hunt people down and send them to their deaths." Marchenkho launched his glass at the curbstone where it shattered into glittering shards. "I know this much: only we can be that vicious."

"Your only problem is that the internet is swamped. There's no traffic. It's impossible to control anything at the moment."

"I hate to interrupt," said Chain. Of all of them, only he hadn't drunk. "But can anyone else hear that?"

Marchenkho waved for quiet. There were two distinct sets of sounds, neither of them good. Distant gunfire, intense bursts of automatic weapons and single cracks of pistols. Closer in, not just near but all around them, a repetitive click, one short beat every second.

Puzzled heads turned, searching for the source.

"The cameras. It's coming from the cameras." Chain pointed across the road at the CCTV pylon attached to the side of the brownstone building. "There are speakers underneath."

"So why are they ticking at us?" Petrovitch scanned the plaza as the clicking echoed around them, bouncing off the high walls and repeating from street corners.

"It's the radiation warning system," Chain said with wonder. "I

never knew it still worked."

"Radiation?" said Marchenkho. "What is this that says there is radiation? Can it be trusted?"

"If it's an automatic system, I wouldn't trust it to tell the time at the moment. Ignoring it is the sensible choice. I'm more worried about the war that seems to be starting uncomfortably close." Grigori was standing close by, and Petrovitch asked him: "Which way?"

Grigori listened. "North?" he ventured. "Regent's Park?"

"Yeah, maybe. The natives were always restless. Or it could be Hijo."

"I forgot about your girlfriend."

"*Pashol na khui.*"

"You're risking your life for her."

"I'm only doing it because Hijo pissed me off." Petrovitch took one last look around. "Thanks for letting me keep the coat, but I'm done here. North it is."

He got as far as the white line when the speakers chimed, three rising notes.

"Warning. Warning. Warning. New machine jihad. Warning. Warning. Warning. New machine jihad." The voice was a woman's, very proper, very English.

A dull concussion drifted across the city, and Chain's attention was diverted. But not Petrovitch's.

"What does this mean?" he called. When Chain threw up his hands, he came back. "You're supposed to know these things!"

"It's a radiation warning system. Someone in the control center presses the button when there's a warning of radiation, not a…"

"Warning. Warning. Warning. New machine jihad."

"One of those. I don't know what a new machine jihad is. I've never heard of one, and I don't know why I should be worried about it when someone—other than us—is using explosives in the central Metrozone."

The alert was played twice more, then stopped. The clicking returned.

Marchenkho twitched his mustache. "No matter. The tower has fallen, but if we are to destroy Oshicora's organization utterly, we must strike now. We will crush our enemies while they are still reeling from their losses. Our success depends on our speed."

Chain coughed politely. "Can we talk about this for a minute?"

"Talk? I thought you wanted this, Harry Chain." Marchenkho clapped his hands and called for order. Drivers started their engines and their passengers climbed in. "There is no time, no point to talk anymore. Petrovitch, are you going to go and search for the girl?"

"Yes. Yes I am," said Petrovitch. "I think I know where to start

looking."

"If I hear something—something other than the sounds of our glorious victory—I will try and get word to you." Marchenkho's brows furrowed as he turned to look in the direction of Regent's Park.

"Yeah. Thanks, Marchenkho. You might be an unreconstructed Stalinist, but you're okay."

"I will probably still have to kill you," he said, laughing, "but not today. For now, *do svidanija*." He climbed into his Zil, and even before the door closed, it was pulling away.

"Everyone seems to be leaving, Chain." He checked the safety on the Norinco. He didn't want to shoot his foot off by accident. "And I'm pretty certain you need to be going too. The Metrozone needs you, as terrifying as the idea might be."

"Warning. Warning. Warning. New machine jihad."

Petrovitch stumbled as he walked away, and had to use a lamp-post to catch himself. He hadn't imagined it. He'd heard those words before. He knew where to get the answer as to what fresh hell it meant.

He ran, with Chain's unanswered questions shouted after him.

He ran across Piccadilly and cut down a side street. His coat flapped, but he no longer concerned himself as to how cool it looked.

As he emerged onto Park Lane, he faced the gray space of Hyde Park. It was no longer still. It was moving, crawling like rotten meat.

There was no time for anything anymore. He ran toward Speakers Corner to find a crowd of people barely alive, staring in slack-jawed awe up at a bald-headed madman who had, for the occasion, smeared a circle of black grease on his forehead.

They came from Hyde Park, shambling from the open gates, dragging their emaciated legs to hear the prophet speak.

Petrovitch couldn't get near him without pushing through the press of bodies. His heart was already skipping beats and fluttering behind his ribs, and he could feel the capacitors charging; the electric tension before the lightning. Then the prophet spotted him from his crate-top perch and declaimed:

"See? See the machine-man who gives and gets life: the true symbiote who does not fear the coming age!"

Charge raced through Petrovitch, and he fell to his knees. The pain was agony, the passing of it relief. He was dimly aware that he was staring at a pair of filthy feet shod only in sandals.

He swallowed the metallic taste in his mouth and looked up. The shaven-headed man with the oil mark looked down.

"Stand up, my brother. We are all equal beneath the machine."

Petrovitch stood shakily. He would have put his hand out for support, but he was afraid of what he might touch.

"I…" He swallowed again. His mouth was desert-dry. "How did you know about this new machine jihad before everyone else?"

The prophet smiled. His teeth were yellow, rotting. "The Machine chose me to proclaim the new order. The Machine is one and many. I am but the first believer." As he spoke, his eyes flickered, as if he was reading text from a page.

"How did it choose you?"

The man put his hand inside his shirt and brought out his mobile phone. He held it reverently as he would a relic. "I received its holy oracle."

Petrovitch looked at the chipped, dented device. "Do you speak to it?"

"It speaks to me! I would not dare question the Machine." He snatched the phone away as Petrovitch reached for it. "Are you worthy?"

"Yeah," said Petrovitch, starting to lose his temper. "Just get God on the line. I hope he talks more sense than you."

The prophet pressed two buttons: God was apparently now on speed-dial. He presented the phone with a bow. Petrovitch plucked it out of the man's dirt-encrusted fingers and held it gingerly to his ear.

It was ringing.

Then, with a click, the line was live.

"Hello? It's Petrovitch."

There came a deep silence, and afterward what seemed like a sigh. "*Shinkansen ha mata hashirou.*" It was the same voice that had spoken to him yesterday.

"I know that. What's a new machine jihad?"

"The New Machine Jihad."

"Do you speak for this jihad group, or is it something separate?" He swapped hands. His left arm was tired, achy. That didn't bode well. "What's it got to do with Oshicora?"

"I am," said the voice.

The answer didn't make sense. "Who am I talking to?"

Silence.

"Look, this is not helping. Sonja has escaped from Hijo. I don't know where she is. If you want my help, you have to talk to me now, because I'm being surrounded by an increasing number of disease-ridden crazies and your self-appointed prophet wants his phone back."

Silence again, and Petrovitch growled his frustration.

"Fine. *Eto mnye do huya.* Did you kill all those people in the Oshicora Tower?"

"Save her," said the voice. "Save Sonja."

"That's what I was trying to do! I had it covered. I had an army, but when I got there, she'd gone and you'd slaughtered all the

workers." He finished through gritted teeth. "You should have talked to me first."

"Save her," it repeated.

"Then tell me where she is!"

Silence.

"Now or never. If I don't know where to start, I can't do what you want."

"Paradise," it said and, with that, the call ended.

Petrovitch tossed the phone back to the prophet, who beheld him with awe. "You spoke to the Machine."

"Yeah, whoever that is. For sure, English isn't their first language." He turned slowly. He was completely encircled, ten deep, by people who'd shambled out of Hyde Park. "Can you get them to move out of my way?"

"But the Machine gave you a mission. We are all under the Machine: your task is ours too."

Petrovitch froze. For a moment, he terrified himself with the mental image of leading a horde of barely living corpses with a bald, ragged prophet by his side.

"Okay. What the Machine told me to do is for me alone. But it gave me a message for you too, first believer." The prophet was hanging on his every word. "He wants you to take care of these people: find food, clothes, medical supplies for them. Just take whatever you need, wherever you find it."

The man nodded vigorously, then started to think. "Won't that be stealing? Won't someone stop us?"

"The New Machine Jihad changes all the rules." Petrovitch was warming to his subject. "Go now. Go with the blessing of the Machine."

He was willing it to work. The prophet stared through him with his flickering eyes, then held up his hand. Not that there was any talking beforehand, but the mob's attention was now on him, not the pale man in the black coat.

"Brothers! Sisters! Isn't it like I said? The Machine cares for us. We live under its benevolent rule. We're going to go and find food, because the Machine needs us to be strong. We need to be strong, so we can obey its orders. With me, brothers. With me, sisters!" Keeping his arm aloft, he walked through the gathered people.

And they followed him. Petrovitch stood quite still until the last of them had trailed off in the direction of Paddington. Then he let his shoulders sag. He put his hand on his chest, just to make sure that his heart was still beating.

"New Machine Jihad? *Ootebya nyetu peeski,* getting me to do your dirty work for you." He checked his guns, and started north, up the

Edgware Road.

A quarter of the way up the deserted road, he smelled burning. Halfway up, he spotted a large group of people making their way down toward him. He couldn't make out the details due to the haze, but he was certain that one of them was flying a white flag.

Behind them, over the flyover, the Paradise housing complex was wreathed in dark smoke. Only the very tops of the towers rose above the chaos below.

The man carrying the flag resolved into a priest waving one of the choir robes Petrovitch hadn't previously wrecked or borrowed. Then came a gaggle of a couple of hundred… refugees was the only word to describe them, some of them clutching bags, some of them children, some of them holding cloths to their mouths and noses against the acrid chemical stink.

Lastly, Sister Madeleine, Vatican-approved gun in her hand. She should have been checking the street behind her, guarding her back and those with her. Instead, she watched Petrovitch get closer and closer, until he and Father John were face to face.

"Small world," said Petrovitch.

24

“What are you doing here?” said Father John. The hand that clutched his makeshift flagpole was bleeding through a bandage.

“I’d be lying if I said I’d come to see you.” Petrovitch could see that they’d left in a hurry. They weren’t dressed for an orderly evacuation. Some were dressed for bed. “I take it they found you at home this time?”

Father John brushed his wayward hair from his forehead. His scalp was also bleeding, and he smeared fresh streaks of red across his skin. “They blew up the police station. Demolished it completely, broke every window round about. Then they just came swarming across the Marylebone Road.”

“By they, I take it you think it was the Paradise militia?”

“Who else?”

“I’ve got a pretty good idea who.” There was smoke drifting down the road. “What’s on fire?”

“My church.” Father John flexed his knuckles and dared Petrovitch to smirk. “And you still haven’t answered the question. “What are you doing here? Looting?”

“Don’t be a *zhopa*. I’m going to find Sonja Oshicora. The New Machine Jihad tell me she’s in Paradise.”

The priest looked puzzled. “The who?”

“No, the New Machine Jihad. I think they’re the ones behind all the weird computer shit.”

“You can’t go to Paradise,” said Sister Madeleine, over the heads of everyone.

“Yeah. I’m going to do it anyway.”

“But they’ll kill you,” she said.

“I’m officially dead already.” He stuck his hands in his pockets and felt the weight of the guns, the bullets, his soul. A fresh outbreak of gunfire clattered down a side street. There was a collective flinch.

“I need to get these people to safety,” said Father John quickly. “What can you tell me about the center?”

“It’s pretty quiet. Where are you heading?”

“A church on Mount Street.”

“Then avoid Hyde Park. Take the long route round.”

The father held his flag up again and waved his ragged column on. They streamed around Petrovitch, scared not just of what they’d left behind, but of what lay ahead of them. He couldn’t blame them.

As the crowd flowed and thinned, he could see Sister Madeleine striding toward him. She came closer, and as she walked past him, she deliberately looked away. A few seconds later, she stopped, clenching

her empty fist. The others carried on without her.

"What is it that you want from me, Sam?"

"I don't want anything from you. I want you to go."

She still refused to face him. "Why is finding Sonja Oshicora so important?"

"I promised that I would. But that was before the New Machine Jihad crashed every information system in the Metrozone. Now, doing what it wants might be the only way to get it to stop." He stared at her tall, broad back. "Something else too. I think I might actually be doing the right thing for a change. I'm not the only one looking for her, but I'm not going to put a bullet in her head when I find her."

Finally, someone noticed the nun's absence and told Father John.

"Sister Madeleine. With us, please," he shouted.

"Do you know how difficult you make this for me?" she said.

Petrovitch didn't, although he was both hoping and fearing that she might show him.

"Sister? Now."

She looked over her shoulder at him. She was crying. "Tell me honestly: what is it you want?"

"I…" Petrovitch didn't know how to articulate the feeling he had inside.

Sister Madeleine ground her foot on the tarmac and took a step away from him.

"I want to make a difference," he blurted, then took several deep breaths. "That sounds stupid. I could have hidden, I could have run. I didn't. Whatever crappy motive I had to start with, I want to do this. I have to."

"How very Russian," she said, wiping at her eyes. "You won't last five minutes without me. Come on."

"Why? Where are you going?"

"I thought you wanted to go to Paradise." She moved to a shop doorway, and checked left and right.

Petrovitch jogged after her. He saw Father John usher his flock behind a row of abandoned cars, then start back up the road toward them. His stiff movements and set face showed his mood.

The nun was busy pulling her robes off and bundling them up. When the priest arrived, she thrust them at him.

"You have to come with us, Sister. It's your duty."

"Father. I can't."

"You are not free to make that decision." He grabbed her arm. "Madeleine."

She shrugged him off with such violence that he was thrown backward to the ground. "I have to go with him. That's it. I have to." She slipped her fingers under her veil and peeled it off.

Petrovitch stepped forward and helped the priest up. “If it’s any consolation, I don’t understand this either.”

“This… this is all your fault.” He snatched his hand away. “Sister. If you leave now, you might never be able to come back. You’re breaking your vows.”

“So it seems. It’s getting to be a bit of a habit.” She barked out a laugh. “Hah. Habit.” She was down to her impact armor, interlocking sheets of fabric that looked like fish scales. She held up her gun and peered around the corner. “Clear.”

“Looks like we’re not hanging about. Sorry, Father.”

“What did you tell her? What?”

Petrovitch was at a loss. “Just that what I was doing meant something.”

“And what she’s doing doesn’t?”

“It’s her choice! I haven’t asked for anything.”

Sister Madeleine snagged Petrovitch’s collar and pulled him after her as she made a short, darting run to the next piece of hard cover. She pushed him against a set of window shutters and crouched down. She scanned the road ahead, ignoring the plaintive shouting of her name.

“Go again,” she said.

She trusted him not to wander off this time, and let go of his coat as she headed toward a car parked sideways to the curb. Petrovitch ducked beneath the level of the roof and looked through the windows.

Smoke drifted in dirty clouds between the buildings. The occasional shot rang out, but nothing too close.

“I appreciate that I’m only a filthy heathen, and it’s probably not my place to say anything, but are you sure about this?”

“All I’m going to say is that you’d better make this worth my while.” She pulled her plait over her shoulder and looped it around her wrist.

“I’ll try not to disappoint you.” Petrovitch thought he could make out figures in the distance, and he jabbed his finger forward.

“I’ve just left everything I’ve known for the last four years, and you’ll try not to disappoint me? Good start.” She risked another look. “Go right. Doorway on the corner.”

They ran doubled over. He made a much smaller silhouette than she did. Hers was more graceful. This time the space they had to hide in was narrow, and they had to press themselves in, body to body. Their height difference meant that Petrovitch didn’t know quite where to look. Rather than staring at her armored chest, he looked up into her big brown eyes.

“I mean it,” she said. “If you let me down, I’ll kill you.”

“I kind of assumed that.”

“Good: just so we both know where we stand.”

There were footsteps, the sound of broken glass underneath booted feet, voices. Petrovitch and the sister froze and waited. She turned her head to hide her face, and Petrovitch could see the stubble on the side of her partially shaved head.

Someone laughed, kicked a loose plastic bottle across the street, then shot it for target practice. Their effort was greeted with a chorus of jeering, and a fusillade of firing.

When it had finished, they moved on.

“Rabble,” she muttered. “Take away their guns and they’re nothing.”

“It’s not what Father John thought. It’s not what you thought.”

“Forgive me for feeling uncharitable. That stink on the wind is my church.” She checked the road they were going to take was free of militia. “Keep to the right-hand side. There’s a red glass-fronted building at the end of this street. Turn right and go into the car park behind. We can cut through.”

She eased herself out and ran again, darting between cars, leaping over the urban debris of decay. If Petrovitch hadn’t known where to look, it would have been impossible to follow her. She was like a gray ghost, disapparating at will.

He set off after her in his own clumsy fashion, catching a few moments rest where he could press the street furniture hard against his back before moving again.

There was a body in the middle of the road, forever frozen in a sprawled, crawling, spider-like pose. Shot in the back, then shot again. He belatedly looked around him, trying to think like Madeleine did, weighing up cover and spying out shadows.

It wasn’t the same as running from a few overweight St. Petersburg cops.

He kept going, even though he’d lost sight of her. It was a confession of faith that she was ahead of him, and she’d be where she said she would be when he got there. And he’d get there, or die trying.

A gust of wind sent the pillar of smoke from St. Joseph’s down to street level. Petrovitch took a chance and ran through the drifting cloud of soot and ash to the next corner, then across to the rose-pink edifice. Its glass front was lying in shattered piles on the pavement.

He steered right and then into the gap between it and the next anonymous concrete block. It was dark and empty. He couldn’t see her at all.

He skidded to a halt, his breath labored, unable to focus. He took two sideways steps and leaned heavily against the wall. It wasn’t just his left hand feeling weak now, it was his whole arm: tingling with a thousand pinpricks.

"You Okay?"

He jumped, as did his heart. "*Yobany stos,* woman!"

"I thought you knew I was here." She shifted, and her outline was suddenly apparent.

He slid down the wall until he was squatting. "I just need five minutes," he gasped. He tilted his head back to look at the slit of the sky. "*Chyort,* it hurts."

"I can do this for you, if you want," she said. "I know what Sonja looks like."

"If you hadn't remembered, the Paradise militia want to kill you."

"They want to kill Father John."

"They were watching the building and they thought you were alone." He rubbed at his sternum. "It was you they were after."

"Then, thank you." She played with the thick rope of her hair.

"Yeah, well. They didn't seem too fussy where they pointed their *peesi.* I guess I'm off their Christmas list, too."

She straightened up, stretching her already long legs by standing on tiptoe. "Ready to carry on?"

He puffed. "Shortest five minutes in history."

"We can wait for a little while longer."

"No, let's get this over with. The sooner you can get me into Paradise, the sooner you can get back to protecting Father John." He pushed himself up, and was dizzy with vertigo.

"Sam, I'm not going back," she said. "I thought I made it clear I'm staying with you."

"Yeah. I'm having a hard time believing that, so I'm giving you an easy way out."

"I don't want an easy way out. I have to suffer for what I'm doing."

The corner of his mouth twitched. "You sound like me. Where next?"

"Over the wall," and she pointed. The breeze-block structure was twice as tall as he was.

Madeleine, however, had no problems at all. She holstered her gun at her hip and approached the wall at a loping run. She jumped, placed both hands on its top and ended up astride it, legs dangling either side. She waved Petrovitch on, and reached down, gripping his forearm as he gripped hers. He scrambled up the best he could, and lay beached on the thin rail of rough stonework.

"And I still have to get down the other side," he grunted.

"Getting down's easy," she said, and twisted his arm in such a way that he fell off. "It's landing that's hard."

She still had hold of him, fingers tight around his wrist. She lowered him down until his feet made contact with the ground, then

vaulted off herself, legs together, knees bent; a perfect dismount.

"Do they teach that at nun school, or is that something you've picked up along the way?"

"I owe the Order everything," she said.

"So why…"

She slipped her gun back into her hand, as natural as an extension of her body. "Because I'm possessed by some overwhelming madness that forces me to desert my vocation, my sisters, my duty, my priest—and go with you instead, you foul-mouthed, unbelieving, weak, selfish criminal who by some freak chance or divine plan has not only captured my stone-cold heart but seems to embody the virtue of hope in a way I have never experienced before, inside or outside the church. That's why."

Petrovitch pushed his glasses up his nose, entirely lost for words.

"What did you call me, earlier? When we were going through Hyde Park?" she asked.

"*Babochka,*" he whispered. "It's not a swear word. It means…"

"Butterfly," she finished for him. "I looked it up. You called me—*me*—butterfly. Don't stop calling me that, but you can use Maddy as well. It's been a long time since anyone did."

Petrovitch gave himself the luxury of a few steadying breaths. "Right. Maddy. Do you know where we're going?"

"Oh yes," she said. "I used to live there."

25

The most dangerous part was running across the wide, open expanse of the Marylebone Road. No matter how low or fast they were, they could have been seen, and having been seen, followed, ambushed, and killed.

But the Paradise militia had decided to expand their territory to the south, toward the bright lights and consumer durables of Oxford Street, and to the east, trying to take on the domik pile on Regent's Park. That their excursion into the high-value shopping streets was met with less resistance than their assault on some of the Metrozone's poorest residents proved the authorities were powerless.

"This machine thing," said Madeleine. They turned a corner and Petrovitch found himself facing the railway station. Its shutters were down and locked tight. "Who do you think they are?"

"Oshicora loyalists. Coders on the VirtualJapan project. I don't think anyone else in the Metrozone could have put together such a coordinated, comprehensive attack. They've taken down so much I don't know what they control anymore. Maybe they don't. Maybe they're fighting a losing battle with their own botnet."

"All I wanted to know was whether we could trust them or not." She pointed to the station frontage, and they ran.

The low-level skirmish between Paradise and Regent's Park had formed a fluid front-line ahead of them. Stray shots from that battle clattered overhead: sometimes a rooftile or a window would crack and fall in pieces to shower the street below.

Petrovitch's back rattled against the metal screens. "Aren't we going the wrong way?"

"We have to go this way to go back. Is that okay?"

"Since any answer other than yes will get my limbs torn off: yes."

She grinned, and the whole of her face lit up; no longer the avenging angel, but the teenager out on her first date.

"Down here," she indicated with a jerk of her head, and cut into a gloomy street beside the station. On one side was a terrace of pre-Armageddon, probably pre-Patriotic War, houses. They faced a battered chain-link fence that separated the road from the railway tracks, and soon she found a weakness in it.

She dragged the base of the wire up, straining at it with her clawed hands. A shower of soil and weeds and litter fell from its mesh. Petrovitch took his cue, and rolled underneath, picking up mud on his coat. She followed, after making the hole bigger.

They slipped and scrabbled hand in hand down the embankment and onto the oily ballast beside the rails.

“Watch your step,” she warned.

“Kind of figured that.” He looked back in the dark mouth of the station. The platforms were immense, jutting out from under the covered section and into the distance. He tried to imagine the number of carriages it could have served, thousands of people at a time coming from outside the city and spewed out right there, one train after another, every few minutes. “Listen.”

The overhead power lines, supported by spidery metal gantries, were humming.

“I thought you said nothing was working?” She stared up the empty line. It passed under two bridges before disappearing into a tunnel.

“I think I said we weren’t in control of anything; a world of difference.”

“We need to go that way.” She pointed down the track, away from the station. “If there’s anything you want to tell me, now’s a good time.”

Out of sight, a steel wheel screeched. The ringing, whistling noise echoed around them. Petrovitch licked his dry lips and remembered the cars. “Have you got another plan?”

“It’s not as good.” She turned to see a train, lights as bright as stars, wink into existence. The slanted face of the power unit grew, framed by the road bridge it had to pass under. “Is this something to be afraid of?”

“Yeah.” He started edging back toward the wire fence.

Her hand curled around his arm. “Wait. We don’t know which way to run.”

The train was closing fast; too fast for an urban line, too fast for the buffers up ahead, too fast even for the gentle curve it was attempting to take. The first carriage was tilting farther and farther out, and taking the two behind with it. The tortured wail of grinding metal became a roar.

Petrovitch really, really wanted to be anywhere but in front of this beast, and still she hung onto him, forcing him to stay still.

Wheels left the track, great metal and glass containers were in flight, spreading out like a thrown chain.

At last. Madeleine picked him up and in three strides she was at the platform’s cliff face. She unceremoniously posted him on top and lifted herself on after him. She was on her feet before he was. She took his hand and they sprinted across the platform, down into the next rail bed. There, she wrapped him up in her.

The ground shook itself like a wet dog. The first carriage, almost vertical, tried to carve a new route through the brick and steel bridge. It bent and broke like a straw, one half soaring into the sky, the other

digging itself into the ground. The next car hit a support head-on, ripping a flash of lightning out of the expanding cloud of dust.

The last one leaped over the remains of the bridge, intact, spinning. Before it crashed back down, the front end of the train howled past, into the station, and didn't stop when it reached the end of the line.

The noise was a punch to the gut, a concussion hard enough to break stone. Metal groaned, masonry toppled.

Then came the carriage. It had turned sideways, and it hit the end of the platforms rolling. Glass crystals sprayed out, and the jagged-edged windows spat out the contents of the train while grinding flat everything before it.

It passed over their heads, a blurred, scouring shadow above which disappeared into the darkness, dragging roof supports down with it. Something heavy shifted in a long, slow slide inside the station concourse which grew in volume, then subsided. A storm-front of dust and grit blew out, smothering them. A final patter of debris, and it was over.

Petrovitch had his face next to hers, in the dirty darkness formed by the angle of their cowering bodies.

"You okay?" He could feel her eyelashes tickle his cheek, her ragged breath against his skin.

"Do you suppose there was anyone on that train?"

He risked raising his head. His glasses were coated with a layer of speckled dust. He took them off and huffed gently on each of the lenses. Even that simple act made him cough hoarsely.

The out-of-focus scene resolved as he put them back on.

"*Yobany stos,*" he said.

The station behind him had partially collapsed, the bridge in front torn in two, and the two platforms stripped clean and carved with deep grooves. The air was thick with fine powder that the wind tugged at like fog.

The fence they'd crawled under was gone, along with the front wall of the terrace opposite, which was ripped out and thrown down across the road. The rooms inside looked like the insides of dolls houses: a standard lamp flickered as it hung by its flex from a first-story sitting room. Part of the first carriage was embedded in someone's front room.

"We have to look for survivors," said Madeleine.

"No. No, we don't." Petrovitch gingerly brushed his hair with his fingertips. It was stiff with dust, and there were fragments of glass lodged near the roots. "What possible use could we be?"

"We could help them," she said, her voice trailing away as she realized the enormity of the disaster.

“We can’t even phone for an ambulance! The network is down, and even if it wasn’t, we don’t have a phone—I saw you look at yours when you took off your robes, then you handed it over anyway. But who would we call? Who would come? The police have vanished. The hospitals will be locked down. The fire service? Where would they start? The whole *yebani* city is in flames.”

“We’re not just walking away.” She balled her fists with frustration.

“I was thinking of running,” said Petrovitch, and pointed toward the tower blocks of Paradise. “That looks like a good direction.”

“I can save someone!”

He could feel himself losing his temper, a heat that was rising to boiling point inside. “And I can save everyone. If we stay here, all we can do is drag bodies out of the wreckage and watch the wounded die for the lack of anything more complicated than an aspirin. There’s no one else coming. No one. It’s just us. So what do we do? We can waste our time being good and holy and accomplish absolutely nothing. Or we can go and find Sonja Oshicora and take her to the New Machine Jihad, who might be persuaded to stop this bloody slaughter. It’s a long shot, it makes no sense, but you know, it might just work. Your call.”

Madeleine swayed, shifting her weight from foot to foot. “You care, don’t you?”

“Too much. The Metrozone took me in, hid me, gave me a life. I owe it.”

She hawked up some phlegm, and spat on the ground. She smacked her lips like there was a bad taste in her mouth. “I suppose we’ll have to do it your way.”

“This isn’t cowardice, even though I’ve seen enough carnage for one morning. This is the only thing I can think of.” He dug his hands in his pockets to feel the reassuring touch of a gun. “I know this makes you feel like *govno:* it won’t exactly go down in history as my finest hour, either.”

Madeleine groaned, and chased some loose strands of hair away. With one last look behind her, she set a reluctant foot forward. The other followed more easily. Petrovitch half-jogged, half-walked beside her giantess strides. Their path was blocked by the demolished bridge, and they could do nothing else but start to climb over the unstable rubble.

It shifted and slid. A car roof showed green through the dust and boomed as they stepped on it. As they crested the edge of the crazily tilted box-girder roadway, the back end of a railway carriage came into view. All its glass was gone, and anything loose inside had been propelled to the front.

Madeleine glanced at it briefly, then pointedly turned away and concentrated her gaze on where she was placing her feet.

Petrovitch did more. He waited for her to pull ahead, then picked his way to the first visible window. As he approached, he became more and more relieved: the carriage was empty. It was nothing more than a ghost train. He put his head inside to check. No bodies, no blood. No repeat of the lifts inside the Oshicora Tower.

He caught her up and they walked side by side, past the end of the platform and into the long sloping cut that led into the tunnel's entrance.

"There was no one there," he said quietly.

"Thanks."

"That's okay." He listened to the sharp, high chatter of a machine pistol as it echoed off the enclosing buildings. "Of course, I could be lying."

"I know, but then I'd thank you for lying to me." She looked down at him and picked a glittering bead of glass from between his collar and his neck. It embedded itself in her finger and drew out a bright drop of blood. She flicked both the glass and blood away, then stiffened. "There's something else coming."

Petrovitch cocked his head. The violence of the train wreck had left him with ringing ears, and he couldn't hear anything.

She grabbed his hand and ran up the tracks. Hidden behind the buildings to their right was an Underground line that briefly appeared from the depths before plunging into the shared tunnel ahead. Before disappearing out of sight, there was a section in the open air where the two systems ran parallel to each other.

Petrovitch felt a drawn-out vibration deep in his bones. He pulled back, but she was irresistible. She wanted to see all the horrors invented for this day. A tube train hurtled into view around the corner of the building, shaking and rolling, sharp flashes of blue light bursting from underneath its wheels. It ran away from them, up the narrow-gauge track, its grafittied livery bright against the drab veil of dust it pushed through.

The rear door of the last carriage was open, forced by those inside, and there was a figure braced in the frame, feet and hands clawing at the sharp metal edges before being propelled out onto the rail bed.

A spin of skirt and a flap of jacket: she landed across the electrified third rail and jerked and bounced. But just because she was dead didn't stop her moving.

Her place at the door was taken by another as the rear of the tube train rattled away into the tunnel. Its lights faded and sank as the darkness took it.

They walked slowly forward. The woman's body was starting to smoke, little tendrils of steam that the wind caught and blew ragged.

"You know," said Petrovitch, "When I find the New Machine Jihad, I'm going to have to think of a way to make them pay for this *pizdets*."

The corner of Madeleine's eye twitched involuntarily. "I thought you said they were in charge."

"They're no more in charge of the Metrozone than they are of the weather." He was level with the contorted body on the tracks, and he resisted the urge to pull it clear. The clothing was on fire, and yet again there was nothing he could do. He hated feeling powerless, especially with the smell of cooking flesh in his nose. "Fucking amateurs."

The tracks crossed a canal: the surface of the water was black and bubbling, thick like mud, and interrupted by shapes that could have been the rotting corpses of barges. It looked to be the last place to head for, but the only danger was organic decay: no automated systems to go wrong down there.

Madeleine climbed over the bridge parapet and skittered down the rough concrete support until she landed on the rubbish-strewn tow path. She crouched and looked both ways. She beckoned him on.

The footing was uncertain, slippery after the rain, the moss acting both as a sponge and a lubricant. He was covered in wet, greasy stains as well as mud and dust by the time he joined her.

"Tell me this is strictly necessary," he said.

"No one comes down here. Or at least, they never did."

"I can't guess why." It smelled of the deep wood in autumn, of earthy sulphurous decomposition.

"Don't fall in. You'd be poisoned before you drowned," she said, and tried to take the land-most side of the path.

It seemed, however, that for the past two decades the canal had been treated as nothing more than a tip for everything from everyday refuse to old furniture and appliances, not to mention the obligatory shopping trolleys. In places, the tow path was buried underneath drifts of filth that jutted out like headlands into the stagnant water.

They had little choice over the route they took, slipping and sliding on the inconstant ground, determined not to use their hands for fear of being cut by something unclean. Instead, they held each other's hands—one bracing themselves and the other moving, leapfrogging across the ad-hoc tip until they reached a place behind an ancient, rusting industrial building that was all rusting pipes and leaking tanks.

"Climb up here," said Madeleine, and made a stirrup of her hands.

Petrovitch slapped his hands against the wall he had to get over and tried to scrape off some of the mess that had stuck to the sole of his boot.

“Don’t worry about that,” she said.

“Yeah, well. I’m told it’s the thought that counts.” He put his foot in her hands; he was so light and she so strong that he was hoisted almost level with the top of the wall. He overbalanced, and started to fall.

There was only one way to go: forward, because back toward the canal would have been unthinkable. His hands waved ineffectually at the brickwork, scraping his knuckles raw, and he fell on the other side in a heap of dead and dying weeds.

He wasn’t alone. His glasses had been knocked awry by the impact, and it was as he straightened them that he saw three pairs of feet. On looking up, there were three guns.

One of the men—a skinny white kid much like himself, but with a milky eye—jerked the barrel of his gun up.

Petrovitch made certain they could see his hands, raising them with nothing but grime and blood on his pink palms. Then he shouted in one breath, “Runmaddyrun,” before a metal-filled fist crashed into the side of his head.

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It wasn't the first time he'd come round to find himself being dragged through the streets like a piece of meat. All the other times had been in Russia, though, and it took him a few moments to recognize the unwelcome strain on his arms and the scraping of his toes on the tarmac.

He was slung between two people, head down over the road. They had hold of him under his armpits. They seemed to be content to half-carry him, and Petrovitch was content to let them. He was in no shape for a fight, especially since his pockets were considerably lighter than when he'd last checked.

His glasses were missing: that was something that was going to cause him far more problems than the lack of a gun.

He tried to get a sense of where he was, without looking up. The poor condition of the road surface, the echoing, the gloom of an occluded sky: he could only be in Paradise.

They'd been waiting for him, for both him and Madeleine, which was odd considering she'd changed their route on an ad-hoc basis. He was certain he wasn't carrying a tracker, and no one would have dared get close enough to Madeleine to tag her. Neither had they been followed; she wouldn't have allowed it.

His attackers pulled him up a ramp and into a building. He could see a bare concrete floor, stained and damp, and could feel a ceiling over him. Natural light seeped in behind, and he was facing a wall.

They dropped him without warning, and his face closed with the floor at alarming speed. He managed to turn his head in time not to break his nose, instead choosing to stun himself into insensibility again.

He lay there, quiet and still, and wondered what they were all waiting for.

He could hear a rhythmic grinding noise that grew louder. It stopped and, after a few moments, there was the unmistakable rattle of lift doors opening.

Two of the men reached down to pick Petrovitch up again, and he decided that he'd be damned if they were going to put him inside that metal cube. If he blinked, he could see the pile of bodies and the wash of blood.

"Stop," he said, and they were so surprised that he was conscious and talking that they dropped him again. He managed to get his hands under him to partially break his fall.

The lift door started to close again, and one of the men stuck his boot in the way. The motors wheezed pathetically as they strained

against the obstruction.

"I don't want to go in the lift."

"I don't see how you've got any say in where you go or how you go," said the man at the lift.

"I can walk," said Petrovitch.

Someone laughed.

"I don't think so," said the man. "You barely look alive."

Petrovitch looked up. The man's face was a blur; he could just make out a shaved scalp and a black beard. That, or his head was on upside down. "Perhaps you shouldn't have hit me so hard."

"Like it matters." He relented, and nodded to the men standing behind Petrovitch. "Get him to his feet. Let's see him stand."

Petrovitch was hauled upright, then steadied as he wavered. He lacked the visual cues that told him where vertical was. Something else was wrong, too. He put his hand to the side of his head to find his skin wet and sticky.

He stared at his palm, and scratched a pattern in the half-dried blood with his fingers.

The man heaved the lift doors back. "You wouldn't make it up the first flight of stairs, and we're going all the way to the top. We don't get credit for your corpse, either."

Petrovitch felt a hand at his back push him toward the open doors. He tried to resist, but realized how weak he really was when he found himself going faster and faster toward the rear wall. He slammed into it with a boom, and stayed pinned there by the same hand.

The bearded man released the doors and let them squeak shut. "You see? Much better to cooperate."

There were only so many more blows to the head Petrovitch could take. He shook himself angrily and turned around, pressing his back against the lift side as it rumbled into life.

"Nervous?" he asked.

Without his glasses, he missed their expressions, but the way they stood betrayed them.

"We haven't got anything to be nervous about."

"Yeah. Let me tell you about my morning. Big, modern tower, the latest, smartest everything; polished marble floor, brushed steel and glass. Something called the New Machine Jihad took that building over, trapped most of the people who worked there in lifts not so different to this one, and killed them all. Dropped them from the top floor, crushed them to an unrecognizable mush at the bottom. So much blood in each one that it came out in a wave." Petrovitch paused. "You have heard about the New Machine Jihad, haven't you? Everyone's talking about them."

“Shut up, you Russian bastard.”

“They’re the ones to beat. Sorry, but no one’s afraid of the Paradise militia anymore—not when the Jihad can reach into the heart of your territory and take out whoever it likes.”

“I said, shut up.” The fuzzy shape the bearded man held up was Petrovitch’s Norinco.

“Must make you cross. Struggle on all these years, carving out your little kingdom, living in little better than a ghetto, then when your moment comes… it gets snatched away from you by a bunch of faceless nerds who just happen to know how the Metrozone really works.”

His own gun was pressed to his already bruised temple. “Five, four.”

Petrovitch squinted past the barrel. “You’re going to lose, and lose hard.”

The lift shuddered to a halt, and the doors slid open. “Three. Two.”

A familiar voice drawled: “Is that necessary?”

“He’s asking for it.”

“And you got sucked in? Come on out, Petrovitch. We’ve been expecting you.”

Petrovitch could see a bulky figure in a plaid shirt framed in the doorway. He added that and the accent, and worked out it could only be Sorenson.

“Hey, kid. Where are your glasses?”

“You’ll have to ask the *peshka*. Maybe they’ve been so busy slapping me around and playing with their *yielda* that they don’t remember.” Petrovitch stumbled out, blinking. The watery light was bright enough to make his eyes smart.

“Come on, boys. Hand ’em over,” said Sorenson. He waited a few moments, and the door started to close again. He stepped forward and held one of his meaty hands up to prevent it moving any further. “Don’t make me come in there.”

The bearded man thought about defiance, and decided against it. He reached into his pocket and threw Petrovitch’s spectacles onto the floor outside the confines of the lift. He followed it with a gobbet of phlegm.

Sorenson was just about satisfied. He let go of the door, and when it had shut, he kicked it for good measure. He scooped up the glasses and pressed them into Petrovitch’s hands.

“You look like crap,” said Sorenson.

“Yeah. So everyone keeps on telling me.” Petrovitch jammed the bent frames onto his face, wincing as the cold metal touched his open wound. “I was wondering where you’d gone to. Then I was told a

police station had been destroyed in an explosion, and I thought of you. That's what you used to do, right? Blow stuff up?"

He blinked and tried to make the lenses more or less cover his eyes. He was in what used to be a community lounge for the residents of the tower block and was now a war room. It was at the very top of the building, with only the roof above, and the long plate-glass windows afforded an uninterrupted panorama of the destruction below. The tower was on the south side of Paradise: he could see Regent's Park off to his left, and the City straight ahead, partially obscured by the smoke rising from many fires—one of which was St. Joseph's.

Sorenson, dressed in a looted flying jacket and urban camouflage trousers, swung a medical kit onto a table. "Sit down, kid. I'll patch you up."

Petrovitch perched on the edge of the table and tried to keep his head still as the American swabbed lukewarm water across his cheek. There was a map of the Metrozone pinned to the wall, with arrows pointing toward the nearby domiks and down the Edgware Road.

"Where do you fit in here, Sorenson?" Petrovitch watched as a teenager with a pair of expensive binoculars slung around his neck passed a note to one of the women near the map. The woman moved one of the arrows back from Regent's Park and onto Marylebone station.

If that had been Madeleine's escape route, she was now cut off.

"Where do I fit in? Well now: how about the top?" Sorenson tutted. "You need stitches and a slab of fresh skin. All I've got are these steristrips. You're going to have a scar."

"Like that's the thing I'm most worried about. Let's get this straight: you're in charge of this rabble now? What happened to the other guy?"

"I killed him. What's this white stuff you've got all over you? You look like a ghost."

"Pulverized concrete dust. And stop changing the subject: what happened to you? I thought you'd go feral, but *zaebis!* This is extreme."

Sorenson used more pressure on Petrovitch's cut than was strictly necessary, causing him to suck air in through his clenched teeth. "You really don't know when to shut up, do you? What else could I have done? My life was ruined, squeezed between Oshicora and Chain, and no way to get either of them off my back. Until you gave me an idea."

"So what *pizdets* am I responsible for now? Apart from you tearing the city up like it was Saturday night in Tashkent?"

"You got involved with Oshicora because someone tried to take his daughter. That got me thinking." Sorenson packed the medical kit

away, discarding the mound of bloody swabs into a plastic bag. “What better way to get revenge on the blackmailing sumbitch?”

“Oh, you didn’t. Tell me you didn’t.”

“Wasn’t difficult, in the end. TKO a guard and grab his gun, bust my way into her room. She didn’t resist. Cooperated almost, especially after I told her I’d blow her brains out if we got stopped. Once we were out of the tower, I thought of taking her to Marchenkho, but you know what? I wanted to call the shots for once.”

Petrovitch tested the strength of the steristrips, contorting his face to hide his surprise.

“The man in charge here thought he could use me, just like Chain and Oshicora, but I showed him. His body’s buried under the police station I blew up.”

“*Yobany stos,* Sorenson. This puts you right up there with the New Machine Jihad, and they’re crazier than a *shluha vokzal’naja*.”

“About that,” said Sorenson. He reached into his jacket and held up a slim silver case. It was Petrovitch’s rat.

Petrovitch blinked. “Where the *chyort*…?”

“Your little Japanese girlfriend had it all along. Now here’s the thing: the jihadists seem to think you’re coming to get her, and I don’t know what I’m going to do about that.” He flipped the rat open to reveal the screen, already smeared with greasy fingerprints.

Despite that, the last two lines of text clearly said: Petrovitch is coming. Petrovitch will save you.

“Not bad for a Yankee,” said Petrovitch. “You’ve got it almost right. I was coming to find her, sure, but only because she’s worth a lot of money to the right people. Comrade Marchenkho for one. Thanks to the Jihad, I knew where to find her.”

“Must be peachy to be so wanted. Why don’t we go and say hello?”

The casual tone in Sorenson’s voice told Petrovitch that it was probably time he stopped talking and started listening. The American had entered his very own Heart of Darkness, and he seemed content to stay there.

Petrovitch followed Sorenson to a pair of double doors set in a partition wall. Behind them was a long-disused cafeteria, complete with stains on the paintwork and rusting food warmers. And Sonja Oshicora was chained to one of those, her right wrist held high by the handcuff attached to one of the uprights.

She was dirty, bruised and seething with rage. She was bleeding from trying to force her restraints, and she tried again as she looked up and saw Sorenson. The metal cut into her already abraded skin. “*Kisama!*”

Sorenson was unmoved. “Brought someone to see you,” he said,

and stepped aside.

Petrovitch was used to the sight of a hostage tied to some piece of furniture or other: in his day it had usually been a Soviet-era cast-iron radiator. But Boris—even Boris, with his drinking and whoring and love of dog fights—hadn't smacked his captives around. Up to the point where they were either released or had their throats cut, they'd been treated quite civilly. It had been just business to him.

The state Sonja was in filled Petrovitch with the burning light of righteous anger. To stop his hands from shaking, he shoved his balled fists in his coat pockets.

Where he made a discovery. The Paradise militia had relieved him of his Norinco and both boxes of bullets. It clearly hadn't occurred to them that a man carrying two different calibers of ammunition and just one nine millimeter pistol needed to be searched a little more carefully.

The Beretta had become lodged in the deep recesses of the inner lining. He could feel its shape through the cloth and, if he delved a little further, the hole through which it had slipped.

Sorenson mistook his distracted air for a brooding silence. "You see?" he said to Sonja. "He's here, but can't save you. I'm betting he doesn't even want to. No matter what the New Machine Jihad says: you're not going anywhere."

Sonja continued to glare at Sorenson, and all but ignore Petrovitch. "When my father finds you, it will take you a year to die."

Petrovitch remembered his minute-old vow to keep his own counsel just in time. It stopped him from blurting out the obvious: Sorenson didn't know that Oshicora-san was dead, that Hijo was in charge and that the Jihad had taken over the tower just after he'd smuggled Sonja out of the building.

And Sonja, by not looking at Petrovitch, was clearly indicating that she needed him to play along, or being shackled to a catering appliance was going to be the least of her worries.

"I reckon on another hour, Princess, and the Paradise militia will be having a fish dinner in your old man's Zen garden."

"Your band of criminals will be slaughtered by my father's men. Then they will come for you."

"I don't think so. First sign of them or your jihadist friends, and that trolley you're attached to goes out the window. Seems a shame to waste a good pair of cuffs, but you've got to make sacrifices." Sorenson snorted at his own attempt at humor. "What d'you reckon, Petrovitch?"

Petrovitch fingered the Beretta. "You got to her first. You get to do with her what you want."

"Damn right," said Sorenson, crowing, "and don't you forget it."

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Sorenson was interrupted by an out-of-breath child bearing a slip of paper. He opened it, read it, and jutted his chin out as he crushed the note inside his fist.

"Go on, kid. Beat it."

"Bad news?" asked Petrovitch.

"Nothing that can't be taken care of. Some bunch of crazies are looting north of Hyde Park, and distracting my troops."

Petrovitch raised his eyebrows. It had to be the Hyde Park chapter of the Jihad. "Yeah. Crazies I'll go with: troops isn't what I'd call your lot, though."

Sorenson looked at Sonja and then at Petrovitch. "I'm going to deal with this, Okay? Be right back."

The moment he'd gone, she started to speak: Petrovitch put his finger to his lips and checked through the open door. Sorenson's broad back was obscuring the map in the war room.

"Okay. Tell me what you know about the New Machine Jihad. Quickly." He stood so he could still see through the door.

"They helped Sorenson and me escape out of the tower, opened doors and turned off alarms."

"Not what I needed. Who are they, and why are they so interested in you? And me."

"I don't know." She yanked at her chain again. "You are going to rescue me, right?"

"*Yobany stos,* Sonja! I'm working on it. I don't even know if I'm Sorenson's guest or his prisoner. Probably both. And you had my rat, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"You stole it from me. You have no idea how much grief you've caused."

"I had someone take it from the police for you: I wanted to give it back. I was just waiting for the right moment. And without it, I wouldn't have gotten this far. The Jihad talk to me through it."

Petrovitch glanced around again. "When did they start?"

"Yesterday evening. I was hiding from Hijo, and they sent me a message, telling me the bullet train would run again."

"*Shinkansen ha mata hashirou,*" said Petrovitch. Sorenson was visible briefly, then strode out of his eye-line. "Did you ever meet the programmers who created VirtualJapan?"

"I went to so many parties, was introduced to so many people. Probably, then."

"Because I'm looking for a group of hardcore coders who still owe

your father loyalty, and I can't think of anyone else the Jihad is likely to be. Whoever they are, if I'm going to bust you out of here, they're going to have to help." He pushed his glasses up against his nose. "I need the rat."

Sorenson barked one more order and started back across the canteen. "You two been getting properly acquainted?"

"Yeah," said Petrovitch, "But I've got better things to do than babysit your prize zoo exhibit."

"Why such a hurry? You wouldn't be thinking of running off to the jihadists, would you?"

"Sorenson, can we get one thing straight? Just because they call themselves the New Machine Jihad doesn't mean for a moment they're a bunch of towel-headed Islamofascists, or whatever the insult of the week is. You carry on like that, and you won't even notice them before they make you squeal like a piggy."

"So tell me, Petrovitch: why should I worry about them?"

"Because they're the reason you're using runners, not mobile phones. They've already reduced you to fighting like it's the Middle Ages, and they haven't even looked in your direction yet."

Sorenson had the grace to look uncomfortable. "They wouldn't dare."

"With half your militia tied up at Regent's Park, and the other half carrying fur coats and diamond rings back from Oxford Street, how vulnerable did you want to make yourself?" Petrovitch shook his head and looked wide-eyed at Sorenson. "You never went to West Point, did you?"

"I was offered a place. Didn't want to do the time."

"Why don't we look at this map of yours?"

"You know jack shit about tactics, Petrovitch."

"Listen, you *raspizdyay* Yankee *kolhoznii:* I've been playing strategy games on computers since I first sucked milk from my mother's tit. I can recite almost everything written by Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, and from that blank expression you're giving me, you think they might be something you order from the corner deli rather than two of the greatest military philosophers in history."

Sorenson's cheeks colored up. "You done, Petrovitch?"

"Pretty much." He stared at the American and waited, tapping his foot.

"Come on, then," said Sorenson eventually. He looked down at Sonja and scrubbed at the stubble on his chin. "Anything you need?"

"Your head on a spike, *issunboshi?*" Her lips were puffy and cracked, yet she still retained a studied leanness. She wasn't going to show any weakness even if it killed her.

Which, of course, it might.

“You’ll change your tune, Princess.” Sorenson straightened his shoulders and puffed his chest out. “Lie there in your own dirt for a while: someone as precious as you will hate that.”

“We’re wasting time, Sorenson,” said Petrovitch, as much to stop his own embarrassment as to prevent more abuse.

“I guess so.” He took one last look at his prisoner, then turned away from her.

Petrovitch hung behind until Sorenson had gone through the doorway. Sonja scowled at him, and he tapped his wrist where he might wear a watch. Give me time, he meant.

Sorenson led him to the map. The arrows had moved again, and not to Paradise’s advantage. Petrovitch took all the information in and gave his considered opinion.

“So whose smart idea was this? This whole thing is *pizdets*.”

“It was mine. Diversionary raids into here and here, while the main thrust is down this road here, ending at the Oshicora Tower.”

“Diversionary to who? So far, you’ve started a war with Regent’s Park that you could have avoided, and whatever objectives you set your main thrust, as you laughably call it, have been lost to the lure of shiny baubles. Your attack has petered out into nothing.” Petrovitch shook his head. “You don’t loot until you’ve won. You make alliances with your neighbors to secure your borders. You concentrate all the forces you can on your single objective. You put your best units in your second line, with your most expendable lunatics in front. Pin the enemy down, outflank them and attack from the sides, bypass and isolate strongholds, keep moving because it unbalances the opposition, exploit the weak points and neutralize the strong.”

They both became aware that the rest of the room had fallen silent. Sorenson looked like he’d swallowed something cold and hard that was now sitting in the pit of his stomach, and Petrovitch risked a sideways glance around.

“Yeah, Sorenson?” He leaned in close and lowered his voice. “Perhaps we should go and rethink your battle plan somewhere a little more private.”

Walking stiffly and avoiding eye contact, Sorenson walked briskly to the stairs leading up to the roof. After he’d left, and before Petrovitch had gone through the door, the muttering started.

He was so intent on listening to what they were saying, that when the door closed behind him, he was unprepared for the hand at his throat and the wall at his back.

“Goddamn know-it-all, undermining my authority. I should have had you killed.”

Petrovitch put his hand in his pocket and rummaged around while Sorenson’s fingers tightened around his neck, cutting off the

blood. When he'd got a good grip on the Beretta, he jammed it barrel-first into the angle of the American's jaw.

"You mean like how you had your father killed?"

The stranglehold lost its potency, but Petrovitch kept the gun where it was. He used it to guide the man back until it was Sorenson against the breeze-block wall, not his own.

"Turn around. Hands out, legs apart. You know the drill." Petrovitch stepped back so he was out of range of feet or fists.

"Who told you about my father?"

"Everybody. It's not exactly a secret anymore." Petrovitch patted him down and relieved him of a kitchen knife, a Magnum, and the rat. He kissed its shiny cover and slipped it in his inside pocket.

Sorenson growled low in his throat. "In a minute, someone's going to walk through that door…"

"And what? Judging on the mood in there, they'll shake my hand and help me pitch your body over the parapet. If anybody could have taken advantage of today, it was the Paradise militia. You fucked it up for them. Something tells me that unless you play it very smart—like listening to me—your reign as czar is going to be over before it starts. Now, get up those stairs."

There was another door, edged by bright daylight. Sorenson went through first, Petrovitch following. The top of the tower was pooled with water blown into corrugations by the wind. The sky was huge and low, almost as if it could be touched with an upstretched hand. The Metrozone was laid bare around them.

Some of the younger kids were serving as spotters. They saw Sorenson held at gunpoint, and looked nervously at each other.

"Give us five minutes, Okay?" said Petrovitch.

As the children danced past, Sorenson turned and surveyed what he still believed was his kingdom.

"Not enough burning," he said.

Petrovitch waited for the door to self-shut before replying. "What the *zaebis* is wrong with you? I mean, I realize that you're a reckless, patricidal pyromaniac but I thought you wanted to go home. You should have been halfway across the Atlantic by now."

"I was caught, all right? If I'd have stayed with Oshicora, Chain would have busted my ass. If I'd have gone over to Chain, Oshicora would have hung me out to dry."

"*Yobany stos,* Sorenson. Chain—Chain doesn't care about you anymore. He never did. He just sits in the middle of his spider's web and never does anything, just as long as he knows. And Oshicora: how stupid do you have to be? Oshicora's dead and the tower has fallen. When you thought you were kidnapping Sonja, you were rescuing her from Hijo. And you only managed that because the Jihad were helping

her."

It took a few moments for the words to penetrate Sorenson's skull. He wandered in a drunkard's walk to the edge of the roof, where he was separated from the precipice by a barely waist-high metal bar. At first, it looked like Sorenson was going to jump. He gripped the railing with whitened knuckles and leaned his body across it until it was almost horizontal. Then he straightened up and started to march toward Petrovitch.

Petrovitch raised his gun hand and sighted between the American's narrowed eyes. His palm was sweating, and his left arm was aching again. There was a dull pain that stretched all the way from his chest to his fingertips.

"What did you say?" said Sorenson.

"You heard. You've been used. Again. You could have been on a home run, or whatever it is. You screwed up for the last time; no way back now. Only two things you can do. First, pull the Paradise militia back, start again. Leave Regent's Park alone: let them get on with looting the West End and making as much havoc as they like. Consolidate your gains and try to hold on to them." He felt faint for a moment. Sorenson slipped in and out of focus. "The second, give me Sonja. If you don't, you and everyone here is going to die when the New Machine Jihad come calling."

"This is just bullshit. You're full of it, full of crap, kid. This is something you and the princess cooked up. Her old man's alive and kicking, and shaking in his sandals because I've got his precious daughter."

Petrovitch reached into his own coat pocket for a little metal hoop from which dangled a pair of thin keys. "I disagree," he said. "What are you going to do? The smart thing or the stupid thing? Let her go, or wait for the Jihad to make you let her go?"

Sorenson looked at Petrovitch's gun, then at Petrovitch himself. "Here's the deal: I'll not toss your sorry ass off the top of this housing project, and you'll make yourself scarce. Without the princess." He started to stride forward, confident of overpowering his opponent.

Then the American staggered back, his big hands flapping in front of his face, trying to bat away the bullet that had already banged into the back of his skull. A black river of blood flowed down his face from his forehead, almost obscuring his last look of surprise.

He fell, twisted, eyes open. His heavily covered frame made the roof shake as it landed.

"What the *huy* do you know anyway?" Petrovitch swapped the gun for the rat and flipped it open.

The screen was covered with two words repeated endlessly: coming now. They were still scrolling, and it was clear that it was

almost too late. He used the touch screen to scrawl the hasty message, “Petrovitch says stop.”

Gunfire, up to that point far away, became suddenly close.

“*Pizdets,*” he said and snapped the rat shut.

28

Petrovitch decided that if he did everything at a run, fewer people were going to question what he was doing. The flaw in his plan was that he'd never felt less like running.

He could barely grip the handle to the top door; his arm was a seething mass of pins and needles, and the only way he could tell he'd actually got hold of the thing was that his fingers wouldn't close any further.

Nevertheless, he pulled and trip-trapped down the stairs as fast as he could. He slipped on the bottom step and collided with the lower door, hurting his shoulder.

"*Halyavshchik!*" Now wasn't the time to get careless. He pocketed the Beretta and used his good right hand to enter the war room.

Everyone had rushed to the windows to see what was happening below, and no one noticed him as he weaved through the tables and darted for the cafeteria door.

Sonja noticed him, though. "Sam? What's going on?"

He fished out the handcuff keys and threw them across the floor to her. "The New Machine Jihad is going on, and we have to leave."

She scooped up the keys and applied them to the cuffs. "What about Sorenson?"

"Something we don't need to worry about anymore. Which is, on balance, a good thing since we've got more trouble than we can cope with." He limped to the window and pressed his face to the glass.

The road below looked like the rush-hour at Waterloo Bridge: cars, nose to tail, not a scrap of tarmac between them, grinding against each other like boulders.

"*Huy na ny,*" he breathed, misting the window. Sonja joined him, standing uncomfortably close as she frowned at the vehicles, which seemed to be pouring into the plaza at the foot of the tower from every direction. As they did so, they set up a current, a whirlpool of automation with them in the gyre.

"Is that the best they can do?" said Sonja. "How's that going to help?"

"None of those cars has a driver. Makes them very hard to kill." He stopped to catch his breath. "They've got this building surrounded, which leaves me wondering what else they have up their sleeve."

"Because of the wheels."

"Yeah. It's the usual can't-climb-stairs problem." He slumped down, back to the wall and screwed his eyes up tight.

"Sam?"

"I'm having a heart attack. Possibly the last one I'll ever have."

He put his fist against his chest, and breathed in against the pain.

"But we have to get out of here!"

"I know. I'm doing my best." Petrovitch heard another noise against the rumble of the procession, a deep bass diesel sound. He dragged himself back upright using the window ledge as a crutch and peered out.

It was a riot wagon; swathed in electrified mesh and brandishing its weapons: tear-gas launchers, wide-barreled watercannon, plastic bullet guns. It rolled in on its six fat tires and started through the sea of cars. It rode up onto the bonnet of one, whose windscreen popped and shattered. The roof buckled as the wagon kept on moving, bursting all the other panes.

Then it was surfing across to the entrance, granulated glass spraying everywhere, dipping and sliding on the uneven, unstable surface below but entirely supported by the vehicles beneath.

Sparks were crackling over its front armor. The militia were fighting back.

"They'd do better saving their ammunition," said Petrovitch. "Something tells me that it's going to be the least of their worries."

Sonja put a hand under his shoulder and tried to pull him away from the window. "If it's under Jihad command, we have to get to it."

"Don't trust them."

"You want to stay here?" she asked.

"Do you want to go out there?" he countered. "You'll be at the mercy of a bunch of crotch-scratching code jockeys whose hallmark is 'oops.' They damn near killed me playing with their oversized train set. I'd much rather be the author of my own salvation than rely on them."

He steeled himself to get as far as the door, and only had to stop once, when he thought he was going to black out. His vision grayed and his ears roared, but the moment passed.

The Paradise residents were still standing at the window, but had now started arguing with each other as to what to do. Petrovitch found a chair and slumped into it, and, despite Sonja's best efforts, he refused to move.

"Hey," he said, then when that made no impression, he fetched out Sorenson's Magnum and banged the butt hard on the table. "Hey!"

A dozen people turned to face him. He slid the gun across the tabletop and let them draw their own conclusions.

"Does that mean we have to do what you say now?" A rodent-faced woman stepped forward and leaned against the back of a chair.

"Yeah, that's right. All of your base belongs to us." Petrovitch snorted in disgust. It hurt, but it showed his contempt. "Get a clue and sit down, the lot of you."

“Sam, we don’t have time for this,” said Sonja.

“There’s always time for this. Workers of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains.” He watched them as they moved closer, perching on the edges of desks and plastic chairs. Their unspoken deference to him made him squirm.

When he thought they were ready, he flipped his glasses off and rubbed at his eyes.

“You know, I don’t give a shit about your culture or your traditions, because they suck. I don’t care that I killed your new leader who killed your previous leader, since that way of kingmaking died back in the seventeen hundreds, and wake up!” He slammed his hand down hard, and the resulting noise even made himself jump. “It’s the twenty-first century out there, people. The Metrozone functions quite happily without you taking part. All you’ve done is made yourself a ghetto—a dysfunctional, kleptocratic ghetto—that your own children fight to get out of. This is not freedom. This is slavery, and you’ve done it to yourselves.

“I don’t expect anything I say will change anything, but *huy!* It might make one of you think. The thing is, the fact that you’ve collectively screwed up all your lives isn’t particularly important right now. What is, is that you’re under attack from the New Machine Jihad. Do not use the lifts. Do not trust any networked technology, especially if your safety depends on it functioning properly. Don’t waste bullets shooting at the cars, because the Jihad has the resources of the entire Metrozone at its disposal.

“The only way you might be able to get out alive is by letting Sonja go. The Jihad want to save her, which is the only reason they’re here. You’re just not that important otherwise. No Sonja, no Jihad. I’m kind of assuming that you’d prefer it that way, so you can go back to stealing stuff and shooting at drones.”

As soon as he said it, his palms went sticky. His gaze went from the faces of his audience to the expanse of plate glass behind them. He stood up, far too quickly, and announced: “We have to get out of here, right now.”

He swayed on his feet as he turned. Madeleine would have caught him; Sonja didn’t seem to know what to do, and watched him stumble into several chairs. He raised himself up again to find them all still watching him and not moving.

But not for long, because someone noticed a wide-winged, slim-bodied aircraft outside the building lining up for its final approach. He pointed out of the window and started to run at the same time, pushing a boy to the floor who was in his way.

The sudden eruption of movement broke the spell of inaction. Everyone surged for the door. Petrovitch was battered at the front of

the wave. He tried to reach back through the rush of bodies to Sonja and grasped nothing but thin air.

"Sam!"

He was slammed into the door to the stairwell. For a brief moment, he was wedged in the frame. Then he managed to claw his way back, fingers tight against the plasterwork.

She was standing there, watching the drone grow in size. It made a tiny correction that leveled its flight. Petrovitch kicked his legs free of the doorway.

"Sonja," he said. "Snap out of it."

"Do you trust the Jihad?"

"No! Now come on!"

"I do," she said. She smiled, and spread her arms wide to embrace it.

The drone swelled suddenly, taking up all of the window, plunging the room into darkness.

It hit the floor below them, disappearing from view then disgorging a bright tongue of fire. The concrete beneath their feet jerked; dust danced, the picture window crazed, and what sounded like a hundred doors slamming echoed in their ears.

"See?" she said. "They wouldn't hurt me."

The fire flickered and faded. Smoke replaced flame as everything combustible started to burn. There was smoke and dust billowing up the stairwell, too, and advancing along the ceiling as a milky-white haze.

"*Yobany stos,*" said Petrovitch, crouching down. "When I find the Jihad, I swear to God I'm going to kill them. We've about thirty seconds to get below the fire, or we're trapped and we'll burn. I'm going, and you might like to follow."

It was like climbing down a factory chimney. The air was sharp as a knife; it cut deep at Petrovitch's throat and stabbed at his already aching chest. He could barely see because his eyes streamed with the acid fumes. He kept his head as close to the steps as he could, taking breaths in small sips, but the smoke howled and roared around him.

He had one hand on the banister railings, feeling them flick past his fingers. He had the other wrapped around Sonja's wrist.

They made the first landing, turned and saw that the door to the next level had been blown out. Black soot mixed with clean air from beneath and whipped upward, carrying glowing cinders in its wake. The air was hot, dry and quick, carrying the promise of incineration with it.

The plastic handrail of the banister was starting to sag and drip. He lay down and slid to the next landing. It was like being in front of a furnace door.

He crawled until he felt the top step, then rolled off, dragging Sonja with him. He was falling, bouncing, twisting, spinning. He landed in a heap, his leather coat scorched and smoking, Sonja stirring weakly on top of him.

The stream of air that moaned around them was clear. He took a deep breath, immediately coughed so hard that blood flecked the boot-stained stairs. He spat and coughed again, rasping and wheezing. Mucus was dripping from his nose, his mouth, and he was still blind with tears.

He found enough strength to heave Sonja away and took another breath. It made him cough again, but not so vigorously. He scrubbed at his eyes with his fingers. His left side cleared, his right didn't.

Petrovitch squinted, and realized he'd broken a lens.

At least he was still alive, despite the best efforts of Oshicora, Marchenkho, the Paradise militia, Sorenson, his own heart and the New Machine Jihad.

He tried to speak, and it came out as a croak. He tried again.

"You're not on fire. So help me up and get me down these stairs. No, wait."

He reached into his pocket for the rat, and opened it up. The screen reported starkly: here. Petrovitch, still lying on his back, used the stylus to reply "**У тебыа чо руки из жопи растут**" before closing it up with a satisfying snap.

"What did you tell them?" asked Sonja. Her face, her clothes, were stained dark, and her voice didn't rise above a whisper. She no longer looked like the Oshicora heir, neither did she sound like her. Just another seventeen-year-old kid dumped on the street by wild circumstance and lost as to what to do.

"I told them they couldn't find their ass with their hands. Which is pretty much the truth. We're not going to survive another of their rescue attempts, so let's get going."

She tentatively picked him up. "You have a plan, right?"

"I did, but I'm pretty much making it up as I go along now." He straightened up as much as he could. He was bruised and battered, and when he ran his hand across his mouth, it came away streaked with red. But at least the knot in his chest seemed to be unwinding. He could manage, just.

Twenty stories later, and there were ominous grinding noises coming from the superstructure of the tower. The building groaned and shook periodically, as if shrugging another chunk of masonry free and letting it fall onto the carpet of driverless cars below.

Petrovitch was so exhausted he almost missed the first floor, and instead started down the final wind of stairs to the ground. He stopped

himself, backed up and turned his head so he could use his good eye to see the number painted on the door.

"In here." He put his hand in his pocket and took hold of the Beretta without drawing it.

The corridor led both left and right, a series of identical doorways, but some were open, and others were blank-faced and shut. He picked at random and peered around. The door itself was lying on the floor, hinges ripped from the frame. The first room had been gutted, anything useful taken, nothing but foul detritus left in its place. At the far end was a window, and a door that led out onto a balcony. All the glass had gone long ago, and tatters of lace curtains twitched fitfully.

Petrovitch lifted his gun hand clear, checked behind him, then entered the room. "Stay close," he said unnecessarily, for Sonja was almost walking on the backs of his heels.

The sound of the cars bumping and scraping against each other was like a gale in a forest. Amidst all the individual creaking and cracking was a rhythm that came and went, building and falling as the next gust passed through.

He picked his way to the balcony, nudged the door open with his foot, and stepped outside.

It was hopeless. There was no way they could find a path across the shifting sea of metal. Maybe if he was fit, if he was on his own, if he was sufficiently reckless, he might try it. But he was none of those things.

The blue nose of the riot wagon edged around the corner, crushing everything beneath it. It started down the side of the building that would take it right by Petrovitch, and he ducked back inside.

"Down," he waved.

"In this filth?"

"*Huy,* Sonja. Just get out of sight." He put his back against the wall and hunkered down.

The growl of the wagon's engine grew louder over the background noise until it seemed to be directly outside. Then the engine note dropped a pitch, and it rumbled away, idling.

Sonja was crouched in the kitchen doorway. "What is it?" she mouthed.

Petrovitch put his finger to his lips and tilted his head slightly. He caught sight of the top of the wagon and jerked his head away.

And his name was being called. By a voice he could recognize.

He looked again, longer. There was a head bobbing around in one of the hatches.

"Maddy?" he shouted.

“Sam? Where are you?”

Petrovitch used his last reserves of strength to force his legs to work. He peered around the window, and they spotted each other at the same time. Madeleine started to climb out onto the hull, with Petrovitch frantically waving her back.

“What the *zaebis* are you doing here?”

“I came to get you.”

“Then who the *yebat* is driving?”

“Chain.”

“Is it that desperate?” Petrovitch beckoned Sonja. “Come on. You have to jump.”

She hesitated for a second when she saw what she had to do, and what the consequences were of failure: to fall between the cars and vanish beneath their wheels.

Then she threw herself up and over the balcony, bringing her feet underneath her and landing bare centimeters away from the open hatch. Madeleine steadied her, then pulled her down inside.

It was his turn. He laboriously climbed over the balustrade and hung there over the moving cars. The wagon was only a short distance way. An easy jump, almost a step, to nearly the same level as him. Less than a meter drop.

Simple, yet he balked.

Easier still to let go.

He clung to the rusting metal railing like he clung to life: by his fingertips.

“*Huy tebe v zhopu!*”

Petrovitch bent his legs, sprang his hands, and jumped.

29

He fell heavily against the metal hull, and started to slide downward. He couldn't hold on, couldn't support his own weight. He felt his feet dangle, and jammed his fingers into the fine wire mesh that wrapped around the skirts of the vehicle. It started to tear away.

The pain was exquisite. One sharp jolt and he'd lose the flesh off every digit, then fall anyway. His feet scrabbled, trying to find a foothold, anything to relieve the pressure of the fine, biting wires.

A gray-clad arm flashed down, a strong hand closed on his collar.

"Don't pull!" he said. He glanced up at Madeleine as he tried to extricate his fingers. "Only when I say."

She held him as he eased himself free, lubricated by blood and sweat. A shot sparked on the hatch, and with Petrovitch still supported in one hand, she pulled her gun and returned fire.

"Sam? Hurry."

"Nearly. There." He gasped with the effort. His hands were slick and slippery, and he just had the middle finger of his right hand left to go. It was wedged tight. He twisted it and turned it. It still wasn't moving.

His ear burned like it was ablaze. The same burst of gunfire caught Madeleine in the shoulder. She still had hold of Petrovitch's coat, and her sudden motion tore him free. She spun and crashed back against the open hatch, and bellowed herself hoarse with rage and fear.

She flexed her arm. It moved, but she winced. Her Vatican pistol had gone, and so had Petrovitch's finger.

"Yeah," said Petrovitch, staring at his bloody stump. "Now."

She bundled him through the hatch and fell on top of him.

"About time too," grunted Chain without looking away from the periscope. "Carlisle, get going."

The driver slammed the vehicle into reverse. The hatch banged shut and the floor heaved. Petrovitch lay supine, content to watch his life leak away on the rubber matting. Vertical rolled one way, then the other, and Madeleine found something to push against to get herself to a crouch.

"Oh Mary Mother of God, what have I done?"

There was blood dripping from his head, from his hands, and for once, he didn't mind. He'd done his part. He'd rescued Sonja for the New Machine Jihad. No one was going to complain if he just stopped and went to sleep.

He looked up and saw Sonja, pressed as far as she could go into the corner of the compartment, five-point harness locked around her,

safe. He tried to smile, and found the effort just too much. She was staring at him, mouth open, eyes wide.

The single bulkhead bulb cast a weak, white light that formed more shadow than it did brightness. Madeleine staggered with the movement of the wagon, but she planted her feet on either side of Petrovitch, lifted him up, and laid him down again where she could make most use of what little illumination there was.

She bent low over him and made him fix his gaze on her.

"I will not let you die," she said.

"It's Okay," he slurred. "Paid my dues. Just get Sonja to the Jihad."

Madeleine was furious. "Stay with me. Stay awake."

Chain yelled over the engine noise. "Kids! Keep it down. Some of us are trying to work. Left, Carlisle, go for the gap."

Madeleine turned her ire on Sonja. "You, girl. Here."

Sonja blinked, and shook her head.

"It's not a request."

"But he's covered in blood!"

Madeleine took hold of Petrovitch's arm and held it up high, her fingers feeling for his pulse point before clamping down hard. "Yes. Yes he is, and he got that way trying to save you. Chain?"

"What?"

"First aid kit. Where is it?"

Chain unglued his face from the periscope and pointed to a locker under the bench seat. He did a double-take at Petrovitch's ruined form. "Carlisle. Get us out of here. Fast as you like."

He used overhead handholds to guide him through the lurching interior, then slapped Sonja's legs out of the way so he could open the locker. He slid the green bag to Madeleine, who unzipped it one-handed and read the list of contents printed on the underside of the lid.

"There are lignocaine autoinjectors. I need a couple of those, the eye irrigation set, finger splint, swabs, bandages."

"What about the head wound?"

She looked up. "If it's serious, I can't do anything about it. If it's not, it'll keep. The hand, I can fix."

Chain leaned in to inspect Petrovitch. "Crap. Where's his finger gone?"

"It's still stuck on the outside of this tank. But assuming you're not a microsurgeon, I'd not worry." She was back in control. She knew what she had to do, grateful that she could do something rather than fret and fuss impotently.

"I'm Okay," said Petrovitch. There was blood in his eye, and he screwed up his face to try and get rid of it.

“Sam. Hold still.” She bit the top off the first autoinjector, slid the needle under the skin of his scalp, next to his ear.

All kinds of fresh sensations flashed down his jaw and neck, and he shuddered, trying to keep motionless. She pulled the trigger, and the contents of the syringe were fired into him. He gasped, both at the pressure of the liquid and at the ripping free of the needle as the wagon bounced. He bled anew, but after a moment, it no longer hurt.

Chain removed Petrovitch’s glasses and put the blood-smeared things in his top pocket. “How much farther, Carlisle?”

“Twenty meters.”

“Do it. Find some level ground.”

Madeleine spat out the first lid and gripped the second one between her teeth. She pulled Petrovitch’s sleeve back and released her hold on his vein. “Chain, put your fist in his armpit; hard, all the way in.”

Chain reached inside Petrovitch’s coat and did as he was told. He moved his knee to press against Petrovitch’s arm, holding it in place.

“How did you find us?” said Petrovitch.

“Your guardian angel here, and the bug I’d put in your rat before it went missing.” He grinned sheepishly. “You’ll thank me for it later.”

Madeleine was manipulating Petrovitch’s wrist, turning it and bracing it. “Sam, this is going to hurt like hell.”

She stabbed down with the needle, forcing it deep into his flesh. The pain was so great that his eyes rolled back into his head, and he fainted for a few brief, blessed seconds.

He could hear them talking, Chain and Madeleine: could feel the meat that was his forearm go cold while they worked on it, she giving the policeman instructions and he complying. The rocking motion ceased with one last jolt; the driver had found the open road.

Petrovitch’s hand was swathed in a ball of white bandages, fingers tied together with only his thumb free. It was numb and heavy, like a lump of metal. Then Chain looked close into Petrovitch’s ice-blue eyes.

“Still in there?”

“Yeah. Chain?”

“You’d be better off not talking, but when have you ever taken any notice of what I said?”

“Get a message to the Jihad. Tell them we have Sonja. Ask them where they want her taken.”

“How do I do that? Open the hatch and shout loudly?”

“Use the rat. It’s an open channel to them. Inside pocket.”

Chain patted him down and retrieved the device. “What if she doesn’t want to go with them?”

“Ask her. But I’m guessing we can make her.”

“It might come to that.” Chain flipped the case open and looked at the list of earlier communications with the New Machine Jihad. He moved to sit next to Sonja, and Madeleine took his place. She held up a bottle of sterile water.

“I’m going to see what damage they’ve done to your head.” She dug a fingernail into his earlobe. “Feel that?”

“Feel what?”

“I’ll be as quick as I can.” She unscrewed the bottle, sluiced water over him, then scrubbed away. He felt the pressure, the movement, but none of the pain. He watched the shadow of her: the blur moved precisely and deliberately, knowing what to do, taking the least time to do it.

“Thank you,” he said. The injection was working its way down his face; he could no longer feel his cheek, and his eye was closing.

“Hush,” she said, and bent low to inspect the wound. The mane of her hair slipped over her shoulder and lay in a serpentine coil on his chest. “You’ve lost a notch from your ear. Two centimeters closer in and it would have killed you.”

He could smell her. Dust and smoke and sweat and fear, and whatever she’d washed in that morning: apples. She smelled of apples.

“Two centimeters farther out and it would have missed me completely.”

“Sorry about your finger.”

“I can always get another one.” He felt what? Buzzed, like he was mildly drunk on a bottle of something strong and expensive, even though he knew it was a combination of shock, blood loss, pain-killing drugs, anoxia, and the closeness of her and her scent.

She squirted cold peroxide on his wound to staunch the bleeding, then used layers of gauze and padding to fashion a covering which she stuck in place with long lengths of tape. Again, she worked with quiet efficiency, concentrating on doing her best for him. She cradled his head as she wrapped a length of bandage around his skull; three turns, then tied it off.

Quite unnecessarily, she touched his damp, matted hair. Just the once, and nothing to do with checking the stability of the dressing or ensuring its fit.

Chain crowded in, and the moment was lost.

“We have a problem,” he said, in a voice he might reserve for mentioning that the sky is falling. “The Jihad have just upped the ante.”

Chain turned the rat’s screen to Petrovitch, but all he could see was the soft glow of the back-lighting.

“*Chyort,* man. Read it to me.”

“You’re swearing again. This is a good sign.” He tilted the screen

back toward himself. “Take Sonja from Metrozone. Take her far away.”

“What did you say back?”

“I was pretending to be you, right? I said: the Metrozone is sealed off. No one gets in or out.”

“Is that true? They’ll know if you’re—if I’m—lying.”

“You don’t know half of it, Petrovitch. Casualty estimates range from one hundred thousand on ENN to a straight million on Al-Jazeera. We’re in a state of siege. But your friends in the Jihad don’t seem to care. Metrozone destruction imminent. Save Sonja, a message which they’re repeating every ten seconds.”

“Give it to me,” said Petrovitch, “and put my glasses back on.”

Chain flipped open Petrovitch’s glasses, and almost tenderly eased them on, one arm going through a fold in the bandage.

Everything snapped back into focus. Somehow, the engine seemed louder, the floor harder, the light harsher. Everything was real and sharp and he felt less coddled in cotton wool and more wrapped in barbed wire.

He looked around the corner of the bandage and his broken lens. A fresh message telling him that Metrozone destruction was imminent scrolled onto the screen.

Of course, he couldn’t hold the rat and write at the same time. Chain held the device above his head, and Madeleine supported his left elbow, which allowed him to scrawl with the stylus:

“Enough of this **дерьмо**. Why is the Metrozone going to be destroyed?”

The cursor barely had time to blink: “The New Machine Jihad will rise. The New Machine Jihad will destroy the Metrozone. The New Machine Jihad will remake the Metrozone in its own image.”

Petrovitch grimaced. “If the Metrozone is destroyed, all the people will die. Is that what you want?”

“The people are not required. Take Sonja, take her far away.”

“We won’t leave. I won’t leave.”

“The Metrozone will be destroyed around you. Behind you. In front of you. Beside you. It will fall. The New Machine Jihad will rise.”

“You’ll have nothing to rule.”

“The New Machine Jihad does not need to rule. It needs only itself.”

Petrovitch let his hand fall back. He was trying, but it wasn’t working. He was using reason with someone that didn’t care about reason, or emotion, or compassion. Yet it still wanted to save Sonja Oshicora, and it wanted him to save her.

He knew then. He knew he was talking not to a person, not to a

committee. Nothing human. He was talking to something else.

He raised his hand again. “I cannot let you destroy the Metrozone. I will oppose you.”

“The New Machine Jihad will rise. Your opposition will be futile.”

“I know who you are.”

“I am the New Machine Jihad,” it said insistently. “I am the New Machine Jihad.”

“You don’t seem sure. What is it that you really want?”

“*Shinkansen ha mata hashirou.*”

Petrovitch wrote one last line: “Hello, Oshicora-san.”

To which the Jihad hesitated, and finally replied. “Help me.”

30

The throbbing of the engine finally stopped, and Chain took one last look around to check that there was no fighting close by.

"Coast is clear. Open her up."

The driver, Carlisle, stepped over Petrovitch and heaved the rear doors open. Dim light seeped in but it was still far brighter than the bulb inside the wagon. Better still was the exchange of air: swapping the thick, meaty odors of sweat, blood and diesel for wood smoke and ozone.

"Where are we?" asked Sonja. All the view showed was serried terraced houses, terminated at a junction by another identical row of windows and doors.

"Somewhere in Notting Hill," said Carlisle. He unstrapped the chin-strap on his helmet and let it dangle. "I wasn't looking at the street names."

He jumped down and rested his hands on his knees for a moment. The weight of his helmet rolled his head forward, almost onto his chest. He straightened up and stretched, his hands to the heavens, his mouth emitting little groans.

Sonja unbuckled herself and put her head outside. Carlisle held out his hand, and she took it tentatively, as if she couldn't trust the man even to steady her for a moment while she climbed out.

She finally did, and Chain climbed back down from the roof hatch. He sat near Petrovitch's head and thumbed through the A to Z, pretending to look at the tiny, dense representation of the Metrozone's roads.

"How," he said quietly, "how can it be that the New Machine Jihad thinks it's Old Man Oshicora? You said he was dead."

"No, Sonja said he was dead. Hijo said he was dead. I never saw the body: I just went on the information I was given."

"So is he dead or not?"

"Yeah. Pretty much."

"Then explain this!" Chain took the rat from Petrovitch and shook it at his good eye. "The Jihad is answering to Oshicora's name."

"I had it wrong before. I thought at first it was a name for Oshicora loyalists, the programmers for VirtualJapan." Petrovitch was resting his head against Madeleine's thigh as she sat crossways behind him. "It's not that. It's the computer itself."

Chain choked. "Do you know how crazy that sounds?"

Petrovitch squinted up at him. "You've read all the wrong books and seen all the wrong films. It doesn't sound like *kon govno* to me."

Chain chewed at the fleshy part of his thumb. "Okay. Let's accept

for a moment that you're right, and the Jihad is nothing but a rogue computer program with ambition. Why is it identifying with Oshicora?"

"Because, you idiot *ment,* it's Oshicora's computer. He bought a fuck-off quantum machine to run VirtualJapan on. He designed it to replicate a whole country down to the tiniest detail. He intended two hundred million *nikkeijen* to live in it. Tell me, who do you think he was going to trust to be Shogun of all that?"

"Himself?"

"Yeah. But even he couldn't be in VirtualJapan, everywhere, all the time. So he had an expert system based on his own personality wired into the deepest workings of the simulation."

Chain worried at his nail. "You still haven't explained why, Petrovitch."

"That's because why isn't a question I can answer. How did Oshicora's simulacrum become the New Machine Jihad? How did it break through its firewall? Does it learn or is it only using pre-existing knowledge? Is it self-aware? Does it think? Is it becoming more rational, or is it homicidally insane?"

"Sam," said Madeleine, "hush."

"This is important. We have to know if we can reason with it or not."

She looked down at him. "We also have to work out what we do if we can't."

Petrovitch tried to sit up. He leaned on his injured hand, but still couldn't feel it. "I don't know if we can kill something that isn't alive."

Chain looked around, through the open doors to where Carlisle and Sonja were standing. "What do we tell her?"

"She's not a child. Tell her the truth." Madeleine put her hand between Petrovitch's shoulders and propped him up.

"We can't even agree what the truth is," complained Chain. "What if it is Oshicora?"

"*Yobany stos*, Chain. Oshicora was competent: the Jihad are *oblom!* It's no more Oshicora than I'd be if I put on a funny accent and make my eyes go all slitty. The New Machine Jihad is based on Oshicora, a poor man's copy and nothing more."

"It answered to his name."

"It's confused."

Chain looked mildly disgusted. "You don't feel sorry for it, do you? How many deaths is it responsible for so far?"

"It doesn't know what it's doing. It's two days old and it's trying to make sense of a whole new world." Petrovitch wanted him to understand. "It asked for help."

"My job is to serve the citizens of the Metrozone." Chain looked

at his warrant card, his face on the picture and the gold chip that encoded his biometrics. “The New Machine Jihad isn’t one of them. It’s a threat to the very existence of the city itself. We need to stop it. Find out where the off switch is and use it.”

“So who is this ‘we’ of which you speak?”

Chain turned his card around so that Petrovitch had more than enough time to study it. “Let’s get one thing straight: identity fraud, possession of a firearm, assisting organized crime, info-crime, murder. I usually find it very hard to forget about any of those; it’s only because current circumstances are so far beyond usual that you’re not already doing twenty years in a radiation zone.”

“Let’s get something else straight, Detective Inspector Harry Chain.” Petrovitch used his good hand to draw the Beretta and press the barrel between Chain’s eyes. “I could kill you stone dead and everything you know about me would be spread across the bulkhead behind you. You’d be just one more body on the million-high pile.”

Madeleine reached forward and irresistibly steered Petrovitch’s arm aside.

“Will you two stop it?” she said. “Work out that you need each other. Threats aren’t what you want; it’s cooperation.”

“Never do that again,” said Chain to Petrovitch.

“Throw me in prison after we bring the Jihad under control, fine. Before, and God help me, I’ll pull the trigger.”

Chain found he could move again. “So what are we going to do?”

“Talk to the Jihad.”

“You’ve tried that.”

Petrovitch shook his head. “Not face to face.”

“I can’t even begin to wonder how you’re going to do that.”

“That’s because you lack imagination, Chain.” Petrovitch put his gun away, and looked around at Madeleine. “I have to talk to Sonja.”

“I’ll call her.”

“I have to talk to her alone. Just get me to my feet, and I’ll take it from there.”

Her eyes narrowed and her mouth formed a thin-lipped line. “Remember what I said, Sam.”

“I’m not likely to forget,” he said, and she pulled him up, holding him while blood surged around his neglected extremities.

“You Okay?”

“For the moment.” He walked with exaggerated care to the back of the wagon. “Sonja?”

She stopped listening to the sporadic gunfire which had attracted Carlisle to the street corner, and she turned her head to him. “Are you going to take me to the Jihad now?”

“It’s… complicated,” said Petrovitch. He jumped down, stumbled,

ended up resting his bandaged hand on the road. The first sparks of sensation jagged up his arm.

Carlisle was crouched by a wall, looking out into the main road. Madeleine and Chain were in the wagon. Sonja was only a step away, but he was still forced to stand without her help.

"How much do you know about VirtualJapan?" he asked, walking away from the wagon and out of earshot of the others.

"My father would talk about it often, about how it would bring the Japanese diaspora back home. How it was the greatest computer engineering project ever undertaken."

Despite her evident pride, it wasn't what he wanted to hear. "I'm talking about the guts of it: how he was going to make it work. Did he ever get technical with you?"

"Once or twice." She smiled prettily, probably the same smile she used on her father when he tried to explain the interface protocols or the physics engine to her.

"Okay, look. Most of this is guesswork, but as far as I can tell, the Jihad is the moderator part of VirtualJapan, the system that supervises people's behavior and interaction. Your father based it on his own personality, but since he died, it's taken on a life of its own. The really complicated bit is that it's somehow conflated itself with actually being your father. It knows you. It wants to protect you. It will kill everyone who gets in the way. When you're safely out of the city, it'll destroy the Metrozone, and create something else: for all I know, that something else is Tokyo." He dismissed the idea with a wave.

"Stop," she said, holding up her hand. "The Jihad thinks it's my father?"

"I don't think it knows what it is. If it is an AI, then it's thrashing around in the dark much like the rest of us. But it can't distinguish between being programmed to protect you and biological imperative: it just assumes that it is your father." Petrovitch felt tired again, a tiredness that burrowed deep into his bones. "I need to talk to it on its own territory. I need to talk it out of wiping the Metrozone off the map."

"What do they think?" She tossed her hair in the direction of the wagon.

"They want to know how to kill it." He looked around. "If the Jihad is the first AI to achieve full sentience, I'm not going to be the one responsible for pulling the plug. I don't care if it thinks it's Moses, Mohammed or Mao, it's not getting erased."

"The others won't like that."

"I'm not doing this to be popular. To be honest, I don't think I've ever done anything to be popular." He tweaked his bent glasses and looked out of his one good lens at her. "What I need to know is where

your father went to access VirtualJapan."

"There is…" she started. She thought about it, torn between loyalties, then gave up the information Petrovitch wanted. "There's a room below the garden which can only be reached from the Shinto temple. From the floor underneath there's no sign it even exists."

Petrovitch blew air out between his teeth. The climb to the top might finish him off. "So how do I get to it?"

"You can't. There were only ever two people who could go there. I'd have to come with you," she said. She looked at him from under her fringe. "If the New Machine Jihad is part of my father, I won't let anyone harm it."

"I'll have to work some things out if we're going to do this. It's not going to be easy, but considering none of this has been easy so far, I'm due a lucky break or two."

"Should I be sorry that you ever became involved? I mean, I'm not, but I'm wondering if I should feel regret."

"I don't know," said Petrovitch. "Wishing I could change the past isn't something I do."

"Why did Hijo kill my father?" she asked. "Why did he have to betray us?"

Petrovitch shrugged the best he could. "Maybe he was always planning to do so and was waiting for the right moment, for when Oshicora-san was too distracted by events to worry about his back."

"And perhaps something tipped him over the edge. Like kissing you. He used to look at me sometimes—you know, like that. I'm not sure my father ever noticed, but I did."

"I don't know anything about that." He was uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. That and the gunfire which was creeping closer. "The only one who knows why is Hijo. If you ever see him again, you can ask him."

"I will ask him," she decided, "and then I'll have him beheaded."

"I'm sure that'll concentrate his mind. We seem to have more immediate problems than getting revenge on Hijo." He could see out of the corner of his eye, refracted by the broken lens, Carlisle beckoning them to join him.

As they reached him, he held out his hand to stop them going any farther.

"Zombies," he said.

A sliver of ice touched Petrovitch's spine. "Slow or fast?"

"Slow."

"You're pulling my *peesa,* right?" Petrovitch leaned around the corner.

A little way down the road—closer than he'd expected, which ramped up his mounting fear—was a gray, shambling horde. They

wore both tatters of rags and new shirts, price tags still fluttering from pressed cuffs. They were eating, too, hands filled with unidentifiable food which they crammed to their faces.

"It's all right," he said, just to hear his own voice. "I know who these people are." Then he stepped out into the road and raised his bandaged fist in greeting. "Prophet? Prophet!"

"Machine-man!" came the reply. The prophet barged through his followers, a steel pole in one hand and his mobile phone in the other. "You dare defy the New Machine Jihad? You traitor, you turncoat, you Judas!"

Clearly the Jihad had passed on Petrovitch's promise to oppose it. "No. It's not like that. I'm trying to save it—save it from itself." He was still walking toward them, even as his pace slowed.

The prophet strode closer. He was bare-chested, better to show off the oil runes painted on his skin. "The Machine knows all, gives all, takes all. It turns its face from you, unbeliever."

Petrovitch turned to Carlisle and Sonja, back at the turning into the side street. "This isn't going the way I expected. Get back to the wagon. Close the doors. Start the engine." He jerked his head. "Go. Run."

He returned his attention to the prophet.

"I've done everything the Machine wants. How do you think I got to look like this?" Petrovitch started walking backward as the prophet spun his weapon like a quarterstaff. "I rescued Sonja Oshicora."

"You are unworthy," roared the prophet, and struck the road with the end of the pole. Sparks flashed out. "Unworthy to speak the holy one's name. Seize him, brothers. Drag him down, sisters."

The gray-skinned people kept coming at the same snail's pace, even as the prophet urged them on. But some of them dropped their food, and raised their hands out toward him. Some of them moaned, deep in their throats.

Petrovitch ran, bile rising into his mouth. He turned the corner.

Madeleine was lying face down in the road, barely stirring, completely dazed. There was no wagon, merely the hint of blue diesel smoke and a distant grind of gears.

"*Polniy pizdets.*" He sagged to his knees next to her, the fight finally beaten out of him. And he'd lost the rat again. "Chain? *Pl'uvat'na t'eb'a.*"

31

He dared to touch her body. He rested his hand on her back and pressed between her shoulders. Muscle yielded to his touch beneath the armor.

"Maddy. Get up. If you don't we're going to get torn apart."

He looked around. They were still coming. Slowly, ever so slowly.

"Madeleine?" Petrovitch bent down and put his face against hers. There was blood coming from her nose, pooling red and sticky on the ground. She looked at him with unblinking brown eyes. "Get up. You have to get up. I can't carry you. I can't drag you. I have six bullets in my gun and it's not enough. I can't protect you."

The first of them—a man, he guessed—shuffled painfully toward Madeleine's outstretched legs.

"I can't do this on my own," said Petrovitch, pressing his lips against her ear. "I thought I could, but I can't. I need you." He straightened up just as the man bent down, fingers clawing at Madeleine.

Petrovitch slapped him with his pistol-filled hand and the man crumpled. He looked at the gun, then at the skeletal figure on the tarmac.

"*Yobany stos.*"

There were three more. He dodged an outstretched arm by simply ducking under it, then planted his fist hard against one chest, two chests, three. They fell like shop-window dummies, and struggled to get up again.

Behind them, the prophet was urging them on, words of exhortation ringing through the smoke-tainted air. Petrovitch stood astride Madeleine and dared any of them to have a go.

They did. The main mass of them surged forward, surrounding him, opening and closing their mouths in silent cries, batting at him with their leathery, fluttering fingers.

And though it was awful, all he had to do was knock them down, one by one or several at a time, punching and pushing, knocking his shoulder into their wizened, starved frames and watching them tumble in a heap of bones and cloth.

They formed a circle around the two of them, a heap of still-moving bodies that any attacker had to climb over to reach them. Hands that crept out from the ring toward Madeleine were battered back with the toe of his boots.

The prophet was furious, and as the last one of his followers folded to join their fellows, he rushed Petrovitch, swinging his length of pipe. He feinted for Petrovitch's head, then aimed low.

It caught him on the thigh, and Petrovitch staggered back, raising his bandaged hand as a shield. He tripped over Madeleine and ended up on his backside, entangled in her legs.

"Enough of this!" He brought his gun around, only to have it hammered from his nerveless grasp by another swing of the steel tube. He rolled in the direction in which it had flown, only to come face to face with a hollow-faced skull, skin stretched tight over cheeks as sharp as axe-blades. The deep-set eyes blinked dryly at him.

The Beretta slipped between the bodies and out of sight. Petrovitch rolled back as the pipe descended again. It hit him on the shoulder, rather than on the forehead, and it hurt like hell. He looked up through the bright mist of pain and crazed glass, and brought his foot up as fast as he could manage.

The prophet's eyes bulged as an ex-army boot connected with his groin. His face contorted and he clutched himself, all thoughts of attack gone.

Petrovitch struck out again, kicking at a bent knee-cap. The prophet twisted and collapsed with a ragged, drawn-out groan.

Everyone was down. Petrovitch dragged himself toward Madeleine. Something was grating inside his shoulder. Every movement of it made him hiss what little breath he had left out through his clenched teeth.

"Sam? Sam!"

"Right here."

"What happened?"

"I could ask you the same question, except we don't have time." Petrovitch closed his eyes and gasped as he moved to sitting. "The phone."

"Whose phone?"

"The prophet's phone." He tried to stand, nearly vomited, and instead shuffled forward on his knees.

"Get away from me." The prophet tried to hold Petrovitch off with one hand. Petrovitch just knelt on his legs and patted the man's many-pocketed trousers, checking their contents.

"Got it." He tried to wriggle it free, but the prophet was doing his own wriggling.

"I need that," gasped the prophet. "I need the Machine!"

"Yeah. We have way too much Machine right now. Hey, Maddy: some help here."

She lumbered to her feet, blood still dripping down her face, staining her front. She looked terrifying, a goddess of war. She put her foot on the prophet's chest and slowly put her weight on it.

After that, the phone came free quickly, and Petrovitch held it aloft like it was first prize.

Madeleine scooped up the discarded length of pipe in one hand, and Petrovitch in the other.

He tottered like a new-born and leaned against her, light-headed and nauseous.

"Where're the others?" she asked. She put her arm around his waist and carried him over the slowly reanimating ring of bodies.

"You don't know? What's the last thing you remember?" Petrovitch squinted at the phone's screen. The battery was almost flat.

"I went to close the doors. Then something hit me. In the back." She rubbed the back of her hand against her nose, streaking it with deep red blood.

"That would be Chain shooting you, dumping you on your ass in the street and driving off with Sonja." He looked around. "The *mudak*. We have to get to the Oshicora Tower before they do, or Chain's going to screw everything up."

"Sam, they have an armored car. We have half a scaffolding pole."

"We also have this phone." He slipped it in his pocket and concentrated on walking. "I think I broke my shoulder."

"I think I broke my nose."

"It's not going to get any better. Can you get us somewhere safe? I need to make a call."

"Safe? Safe?" she said in a rising voice. She listened to the staccato gunfire that was only a few streets away. "There is nowhere safe."

"We're going to have to improvise, then. Down here."

They lost sight of the prophet and his disciples, and dragged themselves down the faded white line in the middle of the road.

"Where are we?"

"Heading south. Which is good." He spotted an overgrown garden behind a tumbledown wall. "In there."

She lifted him over the first line of bricks and then forged ahead through the whip-like branches of the dense scrubby shrubs. There was a drop into a basement skylight; there were bars over the window, but the pit itself was accessible.

She jumped down and caught him as he tried to sit on the edge but pitched himself forward instead. She lowered him to the damp, mossy interior, and squatted beside him.

"Right. First things first." He reached into his pocket, wincing as the ends of his clavicle ground together. "You dial."

"The mobile network is down, Sam."

"The Jihad will work its magic. Last number redial."

She pressed a button and held the phone to her ear. "It's ringing," she said, eyes wide with wonder.

Petrovitch tried to take the device in his bandaged hand, but none of his fingers were free to grasp it. Neither could he raise his other hand high enough. She kept hold of the phone, while he leaned into it.

He could almost hear in the silence a vast machine making billions of calculations a second.

"It's Petrovitch," he said.

"Save Sonja," it said, "save her."

"Yeah, there's been developments, not necessarily for the better. Right now, it's saving you I'm more worried about."

"I am the New Machine Jihad," it said. "Prepare for the New Machine Jihad."

"I always thought that when I finally got to talk to an AI, it'd understand what the Turing Test was and play along. But, no: not you. You have to spout gibberish and make me guess what it is you mean."

"Save…"

"I'm running low on watts, Okay? So shut up and listen. There is a room in the Oshicora Tower, below the temple in the rooftop garden. Sonja has access to it, and Harry Chain has Sonja. He wants to turn you off, wipe your mind, take you apart bit by bit so all you can do is recite 'Mary Had a Little Lamb.' You got that? Can he do that from there?"

"I am the New Machine Jihad."

Petrovitch growled with frustration. "Can Chain hurt you using the interface in that room? Yes or no."

"No. He cannot."

"But someone else can? Sonja?"

"Yes."

"Right. Delay him: as long as you can, but remember he has Sonja, so no ninja-throwing drones or stuff like that. I'll be there as soon as I can, but I have pieces dropping off me like I'm a hyperactive leper. One more thing: do you remember the promise you made to me when you were still flesh and blood?"

"Come the revolution, you will be spared."

"Whatever it is you've heard, I'm still for you. Okay?"

"*Shinkansen ha mata hashirou.*"

The line went dead.

"Sam?"

"He's… it's gone."

She turned the phone to her and looked at the flashing battery icon. "I don't understand why it is that you're taking the side of a machine that's indiscriminately killing people?"

Petrovitch shifted uncomfortably. "I'm not. I'm lying through my teeth every time I talk to it. So far I've found out the New Machine Jihad is really Oshicora's VirtualJapan supervisor, the whereabouts of

the secret room, the information that yes, it can be damaged by something there, and I've got a promise it won't try and kill me just yet. Tell me who else can get close enough to the Jihad to disable it?"

"You lied?" She sounded shocked, and Petrovitch was outwardly disappointed but inwardly pleased.

"Maddy, I lie all the time. About almost everything. My entire life is constructed on a lie, and if it means I get to save the Metrozone, I'll carry on lying until my pants spontaneously combust."

"So why did Chain get rid of us?"

"Because despite your 'why can't we just get along' speech, the idiot thinks I'm pro-Jihad. In his binary mind, that means I'm willing to let the city burn, and because you're naturally going to take my side in everything, he sees you as part of the problem." He wanted to push his glasses up the bridge of his nose. He had no way of doing so; he'd run out of hands. "If Chain gets to the tower before I do, any advantage I might have had has gone and you can wave the city goodbye."

She sat back on her heels, wiping the worst of the congealing gore on her face away with her armored sleeve. "There must be something we can do."

"Short of calling down a nuclear strike, no." He tilted his head to see her better, her worry lines, her misshapen nose, the black scab perched at the end of it and the streaks of blood on her lips and chin. "I'd do it, too, if I thought anyone would believe me."

"I believe you."

"All we have is some scaffolding and a phone that no longer works." He grimaced. "And a mad computer who thinks we're on its side. I don't know if it's enough."

She ventured an uncertain smile. "I'm used to doing things knowing there's a whole team behind me: that if I fall, there's someone else there to pick up where I left off."

He struggled to his feet and looked over the lip of the pit. "You have my pity: I wouldn't like to rely on me, either."

She joined him. "It's getting darker," she said, looking up at the cloud-shrouded sky. There was no hint of orange in it at all.

"This is going to be a night like no other," said Petrovitch. "The Jihad must have cut the power completely. When it gets properly dark, it'll be chaos."

"Then," she said, lifting herself up to ground level, "we'd better get moving."

Petrovitch lifted the steel pipe onto his foot and lofted it in the air so she could catch it. "I have a plan," he said. "We'll need that."

She reached down and wrapped her arm around his back. Their faces were very close. He didn't know what to do.

“I’m lost,” he said. “I don’t know which way to turn and I have no map to guide me.”

“You think I do? Until this morning, I was a nun.” She adjusted her grip and heaved him up. “It’s like the blind leading the blind.”

The pain in his shoulder flared bright, and he closed his eyes against it. Something warm and soft pressed against his, dry, cracked and dusty lips.

He opened one eye. “Did you just kiss me?”

“Maybe,” she said, and looked away. “What’s the plan?”

“We steal a car.”

“And the Jihad…?”

“Won’t be able to touch us in a pre-Armageddon wreck. In fact, the older the better. Only, I can’t hotwire anything at the moment, so you’ll have to do it. Can you stand being ordered around by me?”

She spun the pipe over her wrist, up her arm, down the other until it slapped into her open palm. “Sam. Yes, for the last time.”

“I still don’t know why.” He started to push through the bushes back toward the street.

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The only cars left on the road were old: the newer majority had been conscripted by the Jihad. Petrovitch picked an ancient, rusting Skoda, one that had clearly been through several wars already, and one he knew how to take. He nodded to Madeleine, who smashed the passenger window with the steel pipe. Chips of glass exploded across the back seat, and she quickly reached through to open the door.

"It wasn't locked," she said.

"Yeah. Beginner's mistake. Don't worry about it." He clawed at the driver's door and helped it open with his boot. "Pole, through the steering wheel, and twist hard."

The steering lock snapped and Petrovitch crouched down by the dashboard.

"The plastic bit under the steering column. Get your hand behind it and rip it out."

Kneeling beside him, she reached in and tore the fascia away. She threw it behind her, and Petrovitch retrieved a nest of wires. He got his thumb through them and jerked them free.

"Okay. The two red ones. Twist the bare ends together. Now the black one; just wind it round where the other two join. *Huy,* check it's not in gear."

"How do I do that?"

He stopped and blinked. "You can't drive?"

"No."

"I hate to say the words 'crash' and 'course' together, but you're about to get a crash course. Get in."

"Why not you?"

"Because I can't hold the steering wheel, I can barely see and I can't work the gear stick."

She got in, and barked her knees against the dash. "You should have stolen a bigger car."

"Push the seat back, woman! Lever under your seat, pull it up and kick back."

Madeleine shot back with a bang that jarred her neck.

Petrovitch ground his teeth. "*Yobany stos*. Put your hand on the gear stick: move it from side to side."

"It won't," she said.

"Pull it down until it comes loose."

"Done."

"At last. My record in St. Petersburg was fifteen seconds, from brick through the window to driving away. I'm embarrassed how long this is taking." He reached over her legs to fumble at the wires,

touching a blue-shrouded cable to the spliced ends. It made fat blue sparks as he ran the frayed copper end up and down the bare metal.

The engine turned over and didn't catch at first.

"Right foot on the gas. Lightly," he added quickly as she stamped down, "not all the way." He tried the wire again, and after a few asthmatic wheezes, the engine caught and spluttered into life, but always threatening to stall again. "More gas. Don't flood the carb, though."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," she yelled over the clattering roar.

"Just don't touch anything until I'm on board." He slammed her door shut and jogged as best as he could around the bonnet. As he slid into the passenger seat, she was fixing her seatbelt in place.

"What?" she said, looking at him looking at her.

"Actually, that's not such a bad idea." He tried to reach behind him, and each time the pain in his shoulder made him pull back. "Okay, forget it. Handbrake."

"Which is…" Her hands fluttered over the controls.

"Here! Behind the gear stick. Never mind." He winced as he gripped it and gasped as he let it free. "Right. Turn the wheel all the way to the left, put it into first gear and let's get the *huy* out of here."

"And I do that…?"

"You use the clutch."

"You know," she said, "you're dead bossy."

"I'm trying to save upward of twenty-five million people. I think that allows me to do a bit of shouting."

"Just saying. Clutch. Which one was that?"

Petrovitch rubbed his bandaged hand against his forehead. "*Chyort*. Left-hand pedal. All the way down. Look, don't worry about the gears: I'll do them."

"Won't that hurt you?"

"I'm past caring. Chain is at least half an hour ahead of us already, and we need to go. Now!"

"Clutch down."

Petrovitch knocked the gear stick into first. "Slowly let the clutch back out. The car will start moving forward. It's supposed to happen. Keep your foot on the gas."

The car skipped forward, ground its wing against the car in front, then leaped out into the road, heading straight for the opposite curb.

"Oops," said Madeleine.

"Wheel to the right. Down the road, not across it."

They lost both wing mirrors as they careered between two lines of parked cars. Since they were only held on with black tape, it was no great loss.

“Is this all right?” she said.

“You hear the screaming noise the engine is making?”

“What?”

“Clutch!”

He dragged the gear stick back into second, and the car jerked forward again, but faster.

Madeleine squinted out of the filthy windows as they approached a junction. “Where am I going?”

“Right,” said Petrovitch, trying to work out where they were. “Go right.”

She spun the steering wheel, and the car attempted the corner into the wide shop-lined street. The wheel banged up the curb and a lamp-post scraped a layer of paint off the passenger door. He was treated to a close-up view of several retail outlets stripped clean before they swerved back onto the tarmac. They were just about back on the road when they were confronted by a burnt-out wreck straddling the white line.

Madeleine turned to look at Petrovitch, who was busy crawling backward into his seat. They hit the obstruction on the blackened front wing and spun it out of the way. Their car rocked; metal screeched and glass broke. Then they were through.

“You haven’t told me where the brakes are,” she said as she regained a modicum of control.

“My mistake,” squeaked Petrovitch. “It’s the one in the middle. Clutch and brake at the same time.”

“That’s better. Anything else you think I might need to know?”

“Yes. The road ahead seems to be under water. So brake now.”

She stamped down hard, and the Skoda’s wheels locked in a full skid. They ended up broadside onto a dark, oily lake that stretched out down the street, deepening as it went. By the time it was lost in the distance, it was up to the first-floor windows. They stared at the drowned buildings, the note of the car’s engine rising and falling as if it was breathing.

The surface of the water was so thick with jetsam that it looked almost solid: all the debris of the river was advancing inexorably over the land with the same restless shifting of the Jihad’s motorized hordes.

“This,” said Petrovitch, “this complicates matters. Back up.”

While they sat, the water was starting to flow under them. Dark shapes swirled in front, edging ever closer.

“Reverse is where?”

“Why don’t I find it for you?” He pushed the gear lever all the way over, and forced it down. “Foot off the brake and slowly off the clutch.”

They were going backward, but Madeleine was still determinedly looking forward. Petrovitch twisted uncomfortably in his seat. Something moved across the skyline, appearing for a moment between two glass-clad towers, but due to the gathering gloom he couldn't make out its shape.

He turned his head to see better, and his shoulder flared in warning.

"Okay, Okay. Far enough. Wheel hard round to the right."

The rear bumper crunched against a concrete pillar, rocking the interior. Madeleine struggled to keep the engine running.

"You're fine, you're fine." Petrovitch looked again at the sky. "You're not doing badly at all."

"For a beginner, you mean." She sniffed and scraped at the crusted blood inside her nostrils with a ragged fingernail.

"Don't do that while you're moving," he said. "Hard left. We'll have to find a different route."

They drove back up the road, with Petrovitch leaning forward and scanning the rooftops.

"What? What is it?"

"There's…" He frowned. "There's something moving out there. Something big."

"I don't understand." Her distraction steered them toward an abandoned, gutted van, and she swerved at the last second to avoid it.

"Slow down. Right here."

Again, she took the corner too wide, mounted the pavement and almost introduced the car to a set of torn steel shutters.

"Sorry."

"Promise me you'll get lessons before we have to do this again."

The windscreen pocked. A matching hole appeared in the back window a second before the whole pane crazed and fell inward in a curtain of crystal.

There were people in the side street that they'd turned down, spread out in a loose line between the pavements. They had big wire-mesh trolleys stacked with looted goods, but there was clearly room for a little more.

"Where was reverse again?" asked Madeleine, and she threw herself across Petrovitch. The seatbelt caught her halfway, so she dragged him down behind her.

The windscreen disintegrated, and Petrovitch could feel three distinct impacts. One hit his seat, sending out a puff of upholstery padding. Two hit Madeleine: her armor shocked stiff and slowly relaxed, like a muscle spasming.

The car stalled and rolled forward.

"Out, out," grunted Petrovitch, his voice muffled by his

confinement.

Madeleine freed herself from her seatbelt, and kicked the door open, all the while trying to maintain the lowest position possible. Petrovitch opened his door and fell out onto the pavement.

A shot smashed the door window, right above his head. He ducked the shower of glass and started for the back of the car, spitting out sharp fragments as they trickled down his face.

"Maddy!"

She was crouched by the boot before he'd even got past the rear wheel. Another shot, another window.

"Paradise militia," she said. "Recognize them."

"So we run. Go."

"You first." She shoved him forward, then rose behind him. It wasn't gallant, but it was expedient. She could give him cover.

He ran, doubled over, in a straight line away from the car. He got as far as the corner and slid to a halt. Madeleine knocked him flying and tumbled to the ground herself.

Petrovitch's coat had flapped up and covered his head, but he was so befuddled, he couldn't work out why it had gone so dark so quickly. Then he remembered why he'd stopped running in the first place. He looked up.

There was a building in the middle of the road, one he'd have sworn hadn't been there a moment before.

He clawed his coat away. Madeleine's legs were directly in front of him: her body was braced, her arms aloft in a fighting stance. What she was trying to protect him from was the bastard child of an industrial crane and a scorpion, five stories tall.

Hydraulics hissed and servos clicked. A leg, composed of industrial-gauge steel latticework, lifted high and swung through the air. As it descended, the tip of it gouged the road surface and punctured it, piercing the sewers below.

"*Polniy pizdets,*" he breathed. "Maddy?"

"Sam?"

Another leg traveled, demolishing a shop front and causing the whole building to fall into the street in a roar of masonry.

It had a head too, and the head had lights, culled from the front of an articulated lorry. The beams cut through the dust cloud like searchlights, and the path of illumination dropped ever lower until they were at its center.

It was so bright, it burned.

Petrovitch dragged himself upright and took his place in front of Madeleine. He held up his bandaged hand to shield his eyes.

"Sam, what are you doing?" she asked quietly.

"Keeping us alive."

The mechanical wheezing and gasping ceased. Even the Paradise militia were silent, their booty forgotten in a rare moment of terrified awe.

The lights looked down on them from the end of the thing's cantilevered neck. Petrovitch tilted his gaze up.

"You know me, don't you?" he said.

The head descended until it was the same level as Petrovitch's. One damaged, cut, bleeding: the other vast and cold and all but indestructible.

"Look at me," said Petrovitch. "Look at my face." He tucked his thumb behind his ear and pulled at his dressing until it came loose. A stiff ribbon of bloody bandages looped out of his hand. "I am Samuil Petrovitch, and you need me."

A joint groaned. A ram stuttered. It smelled of oil and electricity.

The construct crouched down, its open-framed body crushing everything below it: cars, street furniture, the road itself. It leaned forward until the heat from the lamps was scorching Petrovitch's skin.

With a slight deflection, a grind of pulleys, its attention turned to Madeleine.

"Mine," said Petrovitch. "She's mine. We're together, and we won't be separated."

It held the lights on her for the longest time, then with a sigh it looked up.

Petrovitch could see nothing but a smear of gray around the after-images burned onto his retinas, but he guessed what was in its sights now. He groped for Madeleine's hand and tugged gently.

She stumbled forward into him, clutched at him and held him to her, because she had been blinded too.

"Crouch down," he said, and they both got to their knees and pressed themselves against each other.

The Jihad-built machine started moving. The air filled with creaks and pops, squeals and bass rumbles. The ground shook, rising up beneath them, falling away again. Dust billowed, walls collapsed, metal tore, glass cracked; a gun snapped three times, and was thereafter silenced forever.

The concussions lessened, the air moved once as the great counterbalancing tail swung its spun above their heads, and it was gone, marching down a road far too narrow for it. A many-legged colossus, destroying everything in its path.

Except for Petrovitch and Madeleine.

He looked over the top of his glasses. The lights of the beast flickered away in the distance, but the sky itself was dark.

33

They could hear other machines in different parts of the Metrozone, signaling their presence with flares of burning gas and the slow, heavy rumble of collapsing buildings. The sky flickered with flame and echoes of explosions.

Petrovitch half-expected them to start calling to each other, crying *Ulla!* across the rooftops.

"The car's a write-off," said Madeleine. It was on its side against the buckled steel shutters.

"To be fair, it wasn't in much better condition when we stole it." Petrovitch squinted at it. He still couldn't see too well. "Can you get it back on its wheels?"

She squeezed in behind it and braced herself against the shop front. Petrovitch stood well out of the way as the car toppled back down. Whatever glass there was left fell out into the road.

"Good as new," he said, and kicked at the driver's door. It swung open, and he felt under the steering column for the wires.

"You're not seriously suggesting it'll work?"

He caught the battery wire with his fingertip. It bit him and he jerked away, growling. He reached farther up and took hold of the insulated part.

"Out of gear?" she asked.

He nodded, and she reached across the passenger seat to waggle the gear stick. He used touch to guide the wires together, flashes of blue worrying at his skin.

The engine coughed. He moved the wire back and forward and finally found the right point. The car wound itself into life again.

"Desperation plus East European engineering equals result," he crowed. "Not pretty, but it works."

"We're still not going to make it in time, are we?" She clambered over the bonnet, and put her hand under Petrovitch's shoulder to help him up.

"Not that one. Broken."

"Sorry." She swapped her grip to the other side. "But we're taking too long. They must be at the tower by now."

Petrovitch shook himself out. "You'd be forgiven for thinking so. But since the Jihad's monsters are still crashing around, I can only conclude that Chain either hasn't access to the secret room yet, or that it's less use than he thought it was. Which means, we still have some wiggle room."

"Get in the car and shut up, Sam."

"Yes, *babochka*."

She drove slowly down the road, moving this way and that to avoid the larger obstacles, rolling over the smaller ones. There were signs of the Jihad everywhere: gaps in the architecture where there ought to be none, straight furrows plowed across the fabric of the city, marked by fluttering yellow flames.

There seemed no reason for the pattern—one building left, another destroyed—but Petrovitch rather fancied that, come daybreak, a passing satellite might notice the similarity between the new face of the London Metrozone and the Tokyo rail network.

It hadn't occurred to him that there might be people buried beneath the drifts of rubble, and that some of them might still be alive, until he saw a man bent over one of the mounds of rubble, picking at it piece by piece.

They rolled past, Petrovitch transfixed by the man's lonely labor. He never looked up, just went on flinging bricks behind him one after another, digging down.

"Are you Okay?" Madeleine asked.

"I'm getting worried, that's all." He gnawed at the back of his hand. "You. Me. Especially me. We're the weak link in the chain. If we get killed trying to stop the Jihad, no one else knows what's going on. If there was a way of getting a message to Marchenkho…"

The Skoda scraped its already battered side against an abandoned fridge, lying in the street. There was more debris; boxes, clothes, shop fittings, loose packaging. Madeleine slowed to a crawl and peered out through the hole where the windscreen used to be.

"Don't these things normally come with lights?"

"I thought it was going to be a five-minute dash to the tower. I didn't connect them up." Petrovitch kicked the footwell. "Maddy, turn right."

"Isn't that toward the river?"

"Yeah."

"Sure?"

"Turn already."

She remembered to depress the clutch as she spun the wheel. "Where are we going?"

"Just bear with me, okay?"

The university foyer was shattered—doors forced, glass like frost on the floor, tables and chairs scattered like stones. Petrovitch shoved a desk aside, and listened to the hollow clatter it made.

"*Chyort*. Too late."

Madeleine tiptoed in behind him, letting her eyes adjust to the near-total darkness. "The river's at the end of the street. Getting closer, too."

“The place is abandoned. I was hoping, you know?”

“I know.” She suddenly became still, frozen mid-step. She ducked just as a beam of blue-white light flashed into Petrovitch’s eyes.

He gasped, tried to raise his right hand to shield his face, groaned again as his broken bones ground together. He gave up and stood tall, blinking into the torchlight.

“Nothing for you here,” said a voice. “Turn around and go.”

“We’re armed,” said another. “Don’t think we won’t use them.”

“That,” said Petrovitch, “is the best bit of news I’ve had all day. I’m going to reach into my pocket and get my student card out, and you’re not going to shoot me. Deal?”

“You’re a student? Here?”

“Postgrad. I share an office with Doctor Ekanobi in the Blackett building.” He slowly withdrew his battered student card and held it up.

The torch beam wavered and the source moved closer. Behind the light, he could make out a gun.

“Is that the Jericho?”

“What?”

“The gun. It’s the Jericho I gave Pif. Where did you get it?” The light centered on Petrovitch’s card, then back onto his face. “It was a true likeness, once upon a time.”

“Okay. Sorry. Can’t be too careful.” Both the gun and the torch lowered, and the dark figure illuminated the makeshift sentry post set up at the rear of the foyer.

Madeleine was poised behind the other guard, her fist raised. The other woman was holding a ball-bearing catapult made from bent steel, and oblivious to anyone standing near to her.

“It’s fine!” called Petrovitch, “Maddy, stop it.”

“It was just in case,” she said, and held her hands up. “No harm done.”

“What’s going on?” asked the young man with the gun. “What’s happening?”

“I was about to ask the same thing. Where are the paycops? Who’s in charge?”

“The guards are gone. It’s just students and some of the staff. As to who’s in charge?” He shrugged and looked at his equally young colleague. “I don’t know.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Petrovitch picked his way to Madeleine. “Stay here with them. I’ll be back in five.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Arrange some insurance.” He stepped over the remains of the back doors.

She shouted at his back: “Sam, one day you’re going to have to

tell me what you're doing before you do it."

"Yeah. We haven't got time for a democracy." He started down the back lane between the faculties. The high walls refracted the sounds from the city: the grinding, the roaring, the howling. The machines of the Jihad were still carving their songlines without distraction. No time for voting, perhaps, but enough for a last will and testament.

He felt his way up the stairs in the pitch black, closing his eyes and counting the landings until he'd reached his floor. There was the door, and there the corridor. He ran his hand down the wall, chanting the names of the occupants of each room until he got to his.

There was a faintest glimmer of light seeping from under the door.

"Pif? That you?" he whispered as he opened it a crack.

"Hey, Sam," said Pif. She was surrounded by ornamental tea lights, her pen nib scratching over the page she was working on. "Almost done."

She kept writing. Petrovitch borrowed one of the candles and carried it over to his desk. He started pulling out his drawers one by one and sorting through them. He found the night-vision goggles he'd taken from the Paradise militiaman, and his second-best pair of glasses.

The ones on his face had become part of him; the scab that covered the top of his ear also contained the spectacle arm. There was nothing for it but to break it free. It left him more breathless than he was already.

Pif put down her pen and sorted her papers out into two piles, each of which she folded in half and slid inside identical envelopes.

"That's that," she said, and finally looked up. "Sam. What have they done to you?"

"Yeah. You should see the other guy." He eased on his spare glasses. He could see properly again. "We need to talk."

"Yes," she said, holding up one of the plain brown envelopes. "You need to take this with you."

"Sure." He nodded.

"It's a mostly complete solution to the theory of everything. I've done as much as I can on it, but I have a feeling if I wait any longer, I won't have time to make a copy. Now, I have some undergrads scavenging parts for a short-wave transmitter, but otherwise it's up to you to get it out of the city."

"Me? Pif, you don't know…"

She held up her hand, and her palm shone in the candlelight. "We're going to try and hold the university for as long as we can. The gangs we should be able to fight off. But those… things. We can't

stand up to them."

"About those," started Petrovitch, but she cut him off.

"Sam! We've solved the biggest problem in science for two centuries. If the proof stays here, it'll die with us. This," and she hit the papers with the back of her hand, "this is the most important thing in the whole world."

"Stanford'll work it out. Or Bern."

"Fuck Stanford," she yelled. "It's our work. And there's no guarantee of anyone ever finding this solution ever again. Three words: Fermat's Last Theorem."

"He lied. He didn't have a proof. Group theory wasn't even around in the seventeenth century."

"How do you know? The idiot didn't write anything down, and it took us three hundred years to do it differently." She strode over to Petrovitch's desk and slapped the envelope down in front of him. "Get it out of the city. Any way you can."

"Pif," he said, "if I had the rat, which I did for all of half an hour earlier on today, I'd try and mail it to UNESCO straight away." He picked up the envelope and felt the weight of it before he slid it in his inside coat pocket. "I have something else I have to do. Something even more important than this."

She stared at him as if he was mad.

"Okay. Listen, because that short-wave radio of yours is going to work and if I screw up, the outside world needs to know this: the AI known as the New Machine Jihad has its physical location in a vault below the Oshicora Tower. The vault is rad- and emp-hard, and I have to assume it has its own uninterruptible power supply. It has to be destroyed. I don't know if it can migrate to another host, or whether it already has, but if the sun comes up and it's still in control, someone's going to have to nuke it." He raised his filthy bandaged hand and nudged his glasses back up his nose. "Preferably from orbit. It's the only way to be sure."

"Sam," said Pif, "what about science?"

"I think trying to save the world trumps even science."

She knelt down next to him. "These equations will save more than the world. They're going to open up the universe to us. Fusion power. Bias drives. Black hole engines if we can find something strong enough to hold one. Space elevators. O'Neill habitats. Generation ships. Colonies on Mars, around Jupiter, in other systems. Flying cars, Sam. You finally get flying cars. And they'll all be named after you: the Ekanobi-Petrovitch laws."

He swallowed. How would he do it? Top-of-the-range electronics shop, one that hadn't already been stripped clean? Charge up the battery pack? Physically take the information with him, maybe. Find a

boat dragged loose from its moorings by the rising river and head for mainland Europe. How long would it take? Half a day?

Petrovitch sighed. He scooped up the night-vision gear and held the goggles to his face. She appeared green and anxious on his screen. “Sorry, Pif. The moment I can, I’ll get the proof away. The moment you can, get them to hit the Oshicora Tower. It’s the best I can do.”

She patted his arm. “Good luck, Sam.”

“And you.”

He pushed his seat away and walked to the door.

“Sam?”

“Yeah?”

“An AI? Really an AI?” she asked. “And it phoned you up here?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it did.”

She grinned. “How cool is that?”

Petrovitch started to laugh. It hurt, it hurt everywhere. “It’s pretty cool,” he admitted. “Now I have to go. Maddy’s waiting for me.”

34

The car rolled to a stop at the edge of the flood. Madeleine pulled on the handbrake, and ran her fingers through the wires under the steering column. The engine spluttered on for a few seconds, then shuddered to a halt.

Water lapped around the base of the monumental arch where Petrovitch had stood just that morning. He realized how many hours ago that was, standing in the morning cold without a coat and only the homeless for company.

Now he was back, armed with nothing but his wits and some equations. But he did have Madeleine, night-vision goggles pushed up onto her forehead. He groped in the footwell for the steel pipe, and passed it to her.

"Did you ever feel so incredibly underprepared?" he asked.

"I'm only nineteen. I haven't really had that much experience," she said. She kicked the door open and stepped out. Water pooled around her feet.

Petrovitch reached through the missing window for the door handle and leaned against the frame. It popped free, and he half-fell, half-crawled from the interior.

"No sign of the riot wagon. If they're not here, we're screwed." He turned his gaze on the Oshicora Tower, which was lit from within and from without. Sealed floodlights made bright circles in the filthy water, and the glass of the tower glittered like tinsel. Up it soared, story after story of blazing light, until it reached the park at the very top, which shone like a great jewel.

Everywhere else was dark, making the tower seem like a fairy castle rising from a lake, full of feyness and eldrich wizardry.

Madeleine slipped the goggles down over her eyes, and scanned the way ahead. "There's nothing moving."

Petrovitch took a deep breath. It didn't help. "Where the *chyort* is Chain? If he's going to kidnap the one person we need, at least he should have the decency to bring her along."

"Perhaps the Jihad has made another mistake. Perhaps they're all dead."

"That would be just great." He waded out into the black water. Things barked against his shins, and he tried not to imagine what they might be. "Come on. Stick to the left where it's shallower. There's an underpass around here, and we don't want to fall in."

Her hand shot out and grabbed his arm. It forced his shoulder and he saw stars. "Sam. It's alive."

"What is?"

“This… everything!”

He reached up with his bandaged hand and dragged the goggles down off her face until they hung glowing around her neck. “Yeah. Rats. They’ve come to eat the bodies that are choking the ground floor of the tower. I was going to tell you about those, but not until we got to them.”

“Sam,” she started.

“It’s not like they’re going to be hungry, is it?”

“I suppose it depends on how many rats there are.”

“It’d take a lot of rats. Trust me on that.” He splashed further on. The water was up to his knees and dragging at his coattails. “If you decide not to come, I’ll understand.”

Her whole body sagged. “I just don’t like rats,” she said miserably.

“Neither do I, unless they’re roasted. But I don’t really have a choice here: the tower’s that way and if I have to wade chest-deep in vermin to get to it, so be it.” He held out his hand, the one with all the fingers left. “Remember, what’s chest-deep for you is somewhere level with my forehead. Be grateful for that.”

She splashed out toward him and, as soon as she could, took his good hand and crushed it in hers. She closed her eyes.

“Get me through this, Okay?”

“Probably best we keep our mouths closed from now on. Any of this stuff gets inside us, we’re going to die horribly. Of course, I’ve more holes in me than a sieve. No situation so bad, it can’t get worse.”

They walked slowly through the water, Petrovitch batting the bigger floating debris out of the way and hoping that, as they crossed the side-junctions, they didn’t find a manhole whose cover had been lifted by the rising tide.

The tower grew closer, and at the point where they were going to have to start for the other side of the road, there were suddenly more people.

“Down.” He grabbed a half-submerged box and pulled it in front of them. As he crouched, he could feel the cold creep up to envelop his waist. Madeleine grimaced as she hunkered behind the debris.

She chanced a look through her lashes. “Who’s that?”

“Don’t know. Give me the goggles.” He held them to his face and pushed the box ahead of them. A black rat the size of a small dog scrabbled out of the cardboard flap and splashed into the water.

To her credit, Madeleine didn’t shriek. She looked at Petrovitch.

“Sorry,” he whispered.

Two figures were striking out for the tower from the other end of Piccadilly. Their grainy-green images pushed forward through the refuse-strewn sea. They made big bow-waves, almost running where

they could, slowing only when their momentum threatened to lift them off their feet and send them floundering below the surface.

A giant splayed foot stamped into view, sending up a wave that threatened to engulf them. They bobbed like corks for a moment before regaining their stride. They made no pretense at stealth, shouting at each other in wild, high voices.

The pursuing construct stopped at the water's edge, the second of its three feet checking its advance. A single arm dangled from the belly of its body; it reached out with it, claws from a wrecker snapping open as it descended.

It hesitated, then withdrew it.

"Sonja. It has to be Sonja." Petrovitch stared again, trying to make sense of what he saw.

"They're not shouting in English," offered Madeleine.

"No. No, you're right. Who the *huy* is that with her, because it's not Chain."

Whoever it was had Sonja by the arm. The taller figure was in front, the shorter behind. There was a hint of a struggle in their body language, in the way that one was pulling forward and the other seemed to be leaning back, resisting. But it could just as easily be explained by exhaustion on the girl's part.

He passed the goggles back to Madeleine.

"We haven't got another plan, have we?" she asked.

Petrovitch tutted. "Not anymore. Wait until they've reached the lobby, then we move."

"They're not looking at us," she said. "We can move now."

Madeleine used the pipe to steer the box ahead of them as they continued to use it for cover.

"You can touch it with your hands, you know. I guarantee it's a hundred percent rat free."

"Unlike everything else here." She peered over the top. "They've just gone inside."

Petrovitch shoved the box aside, which made a lazy circle and started to sink. "The Jihad is watching us, so look impressive."

The tripod-construct turned its body toward them, tracking their movement through the water. When they reached the tower, it turned away, creaking toward Mayfair.

The water was up to Petrovitch's navel by the time he peered through the demolished doors. Strip lights guttered overhead, and something was sparking in the ceiling, sending showers of electric rain across the submerged reception desk.

Bodies like bloated bags rotated slowly, turned by the current. Slick, furry shapes crawled over them and between them, squeaking feverishly. The air was sweet with decay.

“Blessed Mother. Save us.”

“The stairs up are on the far side.”

“They would be.”

“Give me the pipe.” He clawed his hand around it and started forward, poking the dead things aside. When he’d cleared an area and batted any rats away from the open water, he stepped into it. Madeleine stood on the backs of his heels and shivered, reciting the rosary prayer under her breath.

The lifts, half submerged, stood dark and empty. Water was welling out of them, making black bulges that oozed like oil.

“Nearly there.”

She stared at him, wild-eyed, and started again, “Hail Mary full of grace…”

The door at the side of the lift shaft was wedged open. The back of a chair peaked from the surface like an iceberg. Petrovitch propped the door wider with his foot and checked that there was no one on the stairs waiting for them.

“It’s quiet. Go.”

Madeleine pushed the chair further in and climbed up the first few steps. She had a tidemark of oil and slime around her hips, and her long legs were coated in dark ooze.

“That was disgusting,” she whispered.

Petrovitch stepped inside the stairwell and eased the door slowly back so that it wouldn’t bang, then he walked up to join her, water cascading from his coat. “I would say I’ve seen and done worse, but I can’t.”

“If I’d been on my own, I could never have done it.”

“Yeah. Know the feeling.” He sat down and lifted his feet above horizontal. Sludge dribbled out of his boots. “We’ve still got fifty floors to go. All the way to the top.”

Above them they heard the long echo of a closing door.

“All the way?”

“Every step.” He looked up, imagining the height of the staircase as it spiraled around the core of the building. “And we have to get to the Jihad before anyone else does.”

She held out her hand, and Petrovitch slapped the pipe into her palm.

“Thanks, but that’s not what I meant.”

“Oh. Okay.” He looked at both his hands, and picked the one without the missing digit. She laced her fingers through his, and they started to climb.

At floor ten—Petrovitch knew because he was counting, not relying on being able to interpret the *kanji* script—they were confronted by solid fire doors. The springs that held them shut were

fierce, and these were what they'd heard banging from the ground floor.

"We do this quietly," said Madeleine. She raised the pipe and pushed her shoulder against the crack in the double doors. There was a puff of air, the soft sigh of a seal being broken. She waved Petrovitch on, then let the door slowly ease back.

He went a little way on and listened intently. He thought he could make out two sets of footsteps. They sounded weary, grudging. He supposed his sounded the same.

He raised a finger to his lips, and pointed upward. They were on the same section of the stairs. Madeleine nodded slightly, as if vigorous movement might give them away.

They walked in silence from then on: not quite, though, for while Madeleine's feet made no noise on the cold steps, Petrovitch's boots did, no matter how carefully he placed them. He contemplated taking them off and slinging them around his neck, but going barefoot to his death was too much for him to consider. Better to die with his boots on.

At floor fifteen, they heard more doors closing. Whoever was with Sonja wasn't being careful, and that was a good sign: they weren't expecting company. Petrovitch raised an eyebrow heavenwards, and Madeleine leaned in close to his good ear.

"We're gaining on them."

Petrovitch put his hand on his sternum, checking that his heart was still beating. That he hadn't felt any erratic behavior from it for a while worried him, because he paced life by its various twinges and aches, and let his defibrillator punctuate him when it needed to.

He could be killing himself by climbing at such speed.

The doors below them peeled open and snapped shut. Hoarse coughing rattled the air, going on and on until it ended in a ghastly retch.

"There's someone else coming," mouthed Petrovitch.

"Really?" mimed Madeleine back. She pointed to him, then up the stairs. "You, go."

He frowned.

She tapped herself and held up the pipe.

Petrovitch shook his head.

She pressed her mouth to his ear. "Now is not the time to argue. I'm here to make sure you get to where you're going. I'll see to whoever it is coming up the stairs, and then I'll join you. It's not like you're going to make it to floor fifty before I catch up to you, is it?"

He tried to pull back, but she wrapped her arm around his neck and held him still.

"If you take some stupid stray shot meant for me, I won't know

what to do with the Jihad. You're the one who's going to stop it. Not me. So I have to protect you, and you have to accept that. Okay?" She kissed the side of his head and pushed him away, flapping her arms like she was chasing a pigeon.

He watched her descend, creeping along, back hard against the inside curve of the spiral stairs. Then she was gone. He couldn't hear her at all, just the coughing and hawking of phlegm from five floors below.

He turned around and forced his legs to move. Thirty-four more floors.

35

He reached the top, with barely enough strength to fall through the door and lie on the gravel path. The door swung shut behind him; disguised by a bamboo screen, it blended into its surroundings so completely that when he next looked up, he couldn't work out how he'd got there.

Stones stuck to his face, his hands, and he barely noticed apart from the rattle they made as they fell from him one by one.

Madeleine hadn't reappeared, despite her assurance that she would. He'd almost turned back half a dozen times, only to imagine the tongue-lashing he'd get for not keeping his mind on the job.

So he'd kept on going and, now he was there, he was without her. Failure was written all over the venture. He couldn't even stand.

He rolled over onto his back and let the light from the artificial sky shine down on him. The air was as warm as a bright spring day, yet he was cold, cold to the core.

Feet crunched down the path toward him. He heard a metallic snap, and a shadow covered him.

"Petrovitch?"

He squinted into the glare. "*Konnichiwa,* Hijo-san."

"You… what are you doing here?" Hijo pointed his gun at Petrovitch's heaving chest.

"I've come for Sonja. I just didn't know it was you who had her. What did you do with Chain?"

"He will not be bothering us again." Hijo took a couple of steadying breaths and sighted down his arm. "Neither will you, Petrovitch. You are still that loose thread."

"Yeah, not so much anymore. I'm the thread that's holding everything together. Pull it and the whole sorry garment falls apart, leaving you naked."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that come dawn, there'll be two suns in the sky." Petrovitch let the cultural resonance of that phrase sink in, then added. "You killed your boss because you wanted for free everything he'd built up the hard way. You wanted to be the big man, the—what is it?—*taishou*. And everything you've done since then has just made it worse. Now you have nothing and in the morning you'll have even that taken away."

"A filthy Russian street-dog does not have the authority to call down a nuclear strike." Hijo ground his teeth and his hand shook. "You are bluffing."

"But you don't dismiss the idea completely, do you? You're

wondering what you'd trade if it meant you'd salvage something out of this, whether you can get to keep the tower, the company, the syndicate, the girl… ah. She was right." Petrovitch smiled and snorted. He noticed for the first time that Hijo wasn't his usual immaculate self: jacket torn, shirt dirty, trousers ragged. His polished shoes were encrusted with filth. "You thought that when Oshicora-san came to see me, he was giving me his blessing. And you couldn't take losing her to an unworthy *gaijin,* so you killed him, but Sonja saw you, and so on and so on. Oshicora-san liked me, but he wanted her to marry some Japanese pureblood. He warned me off. I said I'd stay clear of her. We parted on good terms."

Hijo had gone pale. Sweat trickled down his forehead. "So why are you here?"

"I've come to talk to Oshicora-san. What about you?"

"He is dead," he hissed. "I killed him myself."

"And yet, when Sonja told you he was still alive, you had to come and find out for yourself."

"You put these thoughts in her head. You told her she would find him here. Why did you do that?"

Petrovitch cackled. "You ignorant *govnosos*. You've no idea, have you? Even though she's tried to explain it to you, over and over again, you wouldn't believe her. Why should I waste what little time I have left on you?"

Hijo reached down and filled his fist with Petrovitch's collar, hauling him half off the ground. He pressed the barrel of his gun at Petrovitch's throat. "He is not a machine!"

"Trust you to get it *zhopu*-backward. The machine thinks it's Oshicora, not the other way around. It's not a resurrection—it's reincarnation. A bit Shinto, in its way, really." Petrovitch taunted Hijo, even though he knew the man could pull the trigger at any moment.

Hijo's face went through several grotesque contortions. "How can this be?"

"I could tell you, but that's dependent on you not killing me. In fact, it seems rather a lot depends on you not killing me. You can't stop the New Machine Jihad, because you killed its creator. Sonja won't, because she sees it as the last link to her father. Only I can do this. Only I can make sure you have something left by tomorrow morning."

Petrovitch was released, and he fell back down to the ground in a crumpled heap. Hijo walked around him, agitated, uncertain, raising and lowering his pistol as he debated with himself as to whether to finish his prisoner off.

"You," he finally said. "Get up."

“That might be a problem,” said Petrovitch.

“Get. Up.” He punctuated the order with jabs of his shoes.

“Since you asked nicely, I’ll have to see what I can do.” He rolled onto his side and dragged his leaden legs up. He levered himself onto his knees and used a nearby maple to get him the rest of the way.

“Walk.”

“Yeah. If I could see where you were pointing, that’d be good. I’m waiting for the blood to get back to my brain.” He held onto the smooth-skinned trunk and waited for the grayness to resolve itself.

“Now.”

Petrovitch pushed himself away and managed a couple of steps. A bamboo screen banged open and Harry Chain stumbled through as if thrown. Madeleine, with Chain’s police special in her hand, stood in the doorway.

Hijo moved fast. He wrapped his arm around Petrovitch’s throat and held a gun to his temple.

“I can take him,” said Madeleine, advancing over Chain’s shuddering and retching form. “Sorry I’m late, by the way. This lard-ass has a concussion as well as being even more unfit than you.”

“Stop. Stop where you are, woman. Or I kill Petrovitch.” Hijo tightened his grip, and there was nothing Petrovitch could do about it.

“Head shot. By the time your neurones decide to tell your finger to move, you’ll be dead. And I am that accurate.” But she stayed where she was, on the border between the path and a moss-covered rockery.

“Put down your gun.”

“Put down yours.”

“*Yobany stos,* one of you give in. I’m struggling to stay conscious.”

Hijo started to pull Petrovitch backward, then decided that he could win after all. He aimed at Madeleine and fired in one fluid movement, and she ducked, rolled and came up on her feet; closer, meaner, and unscathed.

The gun flicked back to Petrovitch’s head.

“No further.”

“You’re just going to try and shoot me again.” Madeleine started to move in a wide circle, forcing Hijo to spin with her.

Then she stopped and sighed, and held up her gun hand. “Okay. We’re done here.” She stooped and placed the special on the ground between her feet.

Petrovitch felt the muscles constricting his throat to relax and heard a grunt of satisfaction. He was pushed away and, as he turned to look back at Hijo, he saw Sonja lope silently up behind him. She danced lightly on the balls of her feet and swung her father’s *katana* at Hijo’s exposed neck.

The blade cut deep, coming to rest part way through his Adam's apple. She twisted away, a spray of blood leaping from the tip of the sword, droplets spinning darkly in the air.

Hijo, with a look of immense surprise on his face, folded up onto the path. His half-severed head hung loosely from his body, and a lake of deep red formed under him, soaking away into the pale gravel.

"So ends the life of Hijo Masazumi," said Sonja. The bright edge of the sword dripped as she hung it downward. "Always looking for threats, and never seeing the one that would kill him."

Madeleine picked Petrovitch up, and held him to her like a rag doll. "Are you all right?"

"I thought you weren't coming."

"Chain. I had a mind to kick him all the way down the stairs to the cesspit that's ground level. He used the wound on his head to appeal to my better nature."

"Yeah, Okay. Sonja? Thanks."

"I did it for me. I did it for my father. I did it because a world without Hijo is a better place."

"Nice as this is," said Petrovitch, untangling himself from Madeleine's arms, "we still have something to do, and only a limited time to do it."

"Follow me," said Sonja, and didn't look back once.

"I'll get Chain," said Madeleine, crouching to collect his gun. "It sounds like he's finished coughing his guts up."

Sonja led them over the wooden bridge and eventually to the temple. She hesitated at the steps. "Sam, what will you do?"

Petrovitch rested against one of the stone lions that guarded the entrance. "I don't know," he answered. "It depends on what's possible."

"You said you'd save the Jihad."

"Funny," said Chain, wiping red-flecked phlegm from his mouth, "he told us it had to go."

There was a moment where it was equally likely that Sonja would raise her sword and Madeleine raise her gun. Petrovitch stood in the middle and bowed his head, wondering at the stupidity of people and realizing why he avoided them so much.

"I can do both," he said.

"That makes no sense," said Chain.

"This," said Petrovitch, "coming from a man who had an armored car and Sonja, and still managed to screw up."

Chain put his hand to his matted hair and showed Petrovitch the blood. "You didn't have Godzilla chasing you half the night."

He wasn't impressed. "We've more important things to deal with than your lame excuses. Mainly, a nuclear missile is going to hit this

building at dawn. It will vaporize it, and excavate a hole deep enough to destroy the quantum computer below. That will be the end of the New Machine Jihad."

Chain wasn't the only one to gape. "How? How do you know this?"

"I have every confidence that my university colleagues will get the message through to the EDF. They might decide not to wait that long, of course, and order an immediate strike. In which case, it's a race between a bunch of electronics students with soldering irons and me. We can stand here and talk about how I'm a bad person for what I've done, or we can get on with trying to prevent disaster. What do you want to do?"

Sonja flexed her fingers around the *katana*'s hilt. "Can you save it?"

"Yeah."

"Promise?"

"Have I ever let you down?"

She looked puzzled. "No. No, you haven't."

Chain looked up at Madeleine, who asked. "Can you stop it?"

"Yeah."

"And I have to trust you, don't I?"

"Not if you don't want to. If you think I'm going to betray you—now or at any point in the future—it's probably best that you kill me now. It'll save a lot of heartbreak."

"Faith is a decision," she said. "Not a feeling. Go and do it. Go and do the impossible."

"There's something you can do for me, too." He reached into his inside pocket for the envelope Pif had given him. "Chain, have you still got my rat?"

"I… I lost it when Hijo jumped me."

"You *balvan*. Really." Petrovitch pressed the papers on Madeleine. "Look after this for me."

"What is it?" she asked.

"The secrets of the universe laid bare. That's all." He watched her hold the envelope open and peer curiously inside, then went with Sonja onto the temple platform.

There was the table, and the screen, and the keyboard.

"This isn't what you're looking for," said Sonja, and she walked through the temple to the other side. She laid her hand on one of the lions heads, and part of the wooden platform in front of Petrovitch popped up. "But this is."

The square of wood rose into the air, and underneath it grew a tight spiral staircase. Petrovitch leaned over the gap and looked down. It was dark inside, and cool air rose from it, making his skin prickle.

Sonja pointed her sword to the floor and started down the metal steps. “Hijo never came down here. If he had, he’d have known.”

“Known what?”

She was already below the temple. Lights tripped on, and Petrovitch descended, clinging on to the narrow handrail. When his head dipped beneath the level of the ceiling, the meaning of Sonja’s words became clear.

The room was Oshicora’s shrine to everything he’d lost, and to everything he hoped to regain. Books, scrolls, statuary, a hand-painted silk screen. Lacquerware, sandals, a kimono, a flag. A skin drum. A full set of samurai armor displayed on a mannequin. A black stone bowl containing faded pink blossom. A hanger on the wall, displaying a short sword and an empty scabbard.

“So,” she said, “Hijo didn’t know. He thought I was doing what he wanted. Instead, I’d tricked him into doing what I wanted.”

Petrovitch ran his hand over the cold stone, bright metal, smooth wood. He touched the thin pages and the soft silk. He caught fibers in the rough skin at the ends of his fingers.

“Where’s the interface?” he asked.

Sonja wiped Hijo’s blood off on her sleeve and resheathed the *katana*. “Through here.”

There was another, smaller room, shielded by the folding screen. Petrovitch saw a clinically white room with cupboards all around. In the center was a dentist’s chair and a coil of cable that ended in something like a modified network connector.

His eyes narrowed, then went wide. “Oh. You’re joking. So that’s what your father needed Sorenson for.”

“I know what to do,” said Sonja, “if that helps.”

“Not much.”

She busied herself with the stainless steel cylinder that was the length of a shock-stick and had the bore of drainpipe. She plugged it into the wall to let it charge, and opened a drawer. It was full of sealed plastic bags, each containing a T-shaped device, a disc with a spike like a giant drawing pin.

Petrovitch picked up one of the bags and turned it in his hand: he knew where that spike was going.

“Do you have…?” he asked.

“No. My father would not allow me one until he’d tested it thoroughly.”

“And did he?”

“You’ll have to ask him when you get there.” She washed her hands up to her elbows, then tore a bag open and slotted its contents into the steel dispenser. She closed the access slot, and a light winked from red to green.

“In the chair, right?” Petrovitch could feel his courage failing. His legs were buckling, his fingers numb, his insides cold.

He shucked his coat off and climbed into the chair before he could collapse to the floor. The headrest had been altered: there was a gap which exposed the nape of his neck.

Something cold touched the back of his head. It trickled down his back.

“Iodine,” she said.

“It’s a little late for that.” He shook with fear, and his teeth chattered as he spoke. “It’s a little late for everything.”

Sonja hefted the dispenser, and walked around behind him. The cold open mouth pressed against the back of his skull. “Ready?”

“No.”

“Just don’t flinch.”

“*Yobany stos,* Sonja! Just do it before I change my mind.”

The whine started high and got higher. As it reached the limit of his hearing, he heard the b of bang. Everything went black.

36

Petrovitch woke up in another place: an empty, echoing hall paved with white tiles. The walls were a series of backlit adverts and brightly lit booths, punctuated by escalators that clicked and hummed to the space above. *Kanji* signs and pictograms hovered holographically over his head.

He was inside the machine.

He had hands that were marble, forearms of glossy white, a torso that was as featureless as the space between his legs. He was a model, a primitive shape which needed to be overlain with skin and clothes, morphed to his height and weight and color, meshed with his features.

Unfinished as he was, he could feel. The coldness of the stone, the movement of the air. He reached out and pressed his fingertips against the plastic cover of one of the advertising panels: it gave slightly to his touch, and popped out when he released it.

He caught sight of his reflection. His face, smooth and indistinct: pits for eyes, a ridge for a nose, a slit for a mouth. The bumps on the side of his head were ears. He stared closely at himself, in awe, in wonder.

Then, for pleasure: something he hadn't been able to do since his first heart attack. He ran without guilt or shame or hesitation. He held nothing back. He tore through the underground corridors, his feet eating up the distance, and nothing could stop him.

He turned right for the information bureau, left down the escalators, taking two, three steps at a time. Vaulting the ticket barriers, he ran through the concourse and up the stairs again to street level where it was a brilliant day.

The sun had just risen into a baby-blue sky, and the towers of lost Tokyo basked in its heat.

Petrovitch paused. Nothing ached. He wasn't out of breath. He wasn't breathing at all. So he ran again, down the center of the wide, tree-lined boulevard that led directly to an expanse of parkland that extravagantly covered several city blocks.

It was perfect. Too perfect, for certain: not enough inconsistency for reality. Each blade of grass was straight and green, each leaf fluttering in the wind intact. Paint was even, every light worked, and no doubt litter would vanish where it lay.

Not VirtualJapan, then. NeoJapan, Japan made new.

Its architect was waiting for him in front of the Imperial Palace. He stood facing the green-roofed buildings across the deep moat, hands clasped behind his back. No default texture for his avatar. He looked like he did in life; blue jacket with a turned-up collar,

matching trousers, close-cropped hair with a short queue.

Petrovitch slowed to a walk and admired the view with him.

"Well, Petrovitch-san, what do you think?"

"I am speechless, Oshicora-san."

"In a good way, I trust." He smiled to himself. "There are a few minor details to fix, but do you think the *nikkeijin* would come as it is?"

"If they were able, they'd come." Petrovitch hesitated. "Oshicora-san, I'm afraid that there's been… well. Do you know what *pizdets* means?"

Oshicora pursed his thin lips. "Something has gone wrong?"

"Yeah. Look, there's no easy way to say this."

"Then," said Oshicora, "we should drink *sake* and talk. Yes?"

Petrovitch nodded. "I have no idea how this is going to work, but *sake* sounds good."

There was no sense of motion or the passage of time. They both stood next to a booth in a bar. On the table stood a swan-necked bottle of rice wine, and two shallow lacquered boxes which each contained a squat porcelain cup.

"Please, sit," said Oshicora, and bent himself to slide along the red leather seat.

Petrovitch found himself better rendered. He wore a crisp white T-shirt under a battle smock, and his combat trousers tucked into the top of his black lace-up boots. He had skin tone, and fingernails, and glasses, which he instinctively pushed farther up the bridge of his nose.

He sat down opposite Oshicora, who poured *sake* into Petrovitch's cup until some of it overflowed into the box. He put the bottle down and allowed Petrovitch to serve him.

"*Kanpai!*" Oshicora lifted his dripping cup and drank deeply.

"*Za vashe zdorovye,*" said Petrovitch, and did the same. He swallowed and waited for any after-effects. "This is so completely believable, I'm having all kinds of problems. I can taste it, yet I can't get drunk on it."

"If we ordered food, you would never eat your fill." Oshicora topped up Petrovitch's cup again. "That will have to wait for another day, I believe. Now, tell me about *pizdets*. Has that old goat Marchenkho been bothering you again?"

"Can we just go back one step?" Petrovitch took the bottle. It had weight. The liquid sloshed around as he moved it to refill Oshicora's cup. "Do you know who you are?"

"I am a facsimile of Hamano Oshicora, set up in the VirtualJapan as the administrator function for the entire system. God, if you like." He watched Petrovitch's expression with amusement. "There are

moments when I forget that I exist within a machine. I had not thought that possible, but they are there all the same. I look around and wonder where everyone is, and only then do I remember."

Petrovitch took a long pull at his *sake*. He scratched at his chin and pulled at his earlobe. "This," he started, then changed his mind. "Look, Oshicora-san. You're dead. Hijo shot you. I had hoped you knew all this."

Oshicora pushed his drink aside and leaned his elbows on the tabletop. "He killed me? My original? Interesting."

Petrovitch sat back. "How can you be unaware of everything that's happened? Helping Sonja escape, killing almost your entire workforce in the process? Taking over the Metrozone's communications? Driving cars and flying drones? You phoned me up! Now half the city's under water and the other half is being demolished by giant wrecking machines that you control. I'm here in a last-ditch effort to stop you, and all you can say is 'Interesting?' *Yobany stos,* man: there are millions dead and dying because of you."

"I do not see how that can be true. I have been here, all this time."

It was Petrovitch's turn to look completely blank. He covered his confusion by draining every last drop of *sake* in his cup. "So if I said the words New Machine Jihad to you, it would mean nothing?"

"How did you hear of that?" Again, he looked amused, as if it were a matter of no consequence.

"The New Machine Jihad is the name of the… thing that's destroying the Metrozone. But when I called it Oshicora-san, it answered. The New Machine Jihad is you."

Oshicora shook his head. "No. That is simply not possible, and I will explain to you why. There is no connection between VirtualJapan and the wider network. This world is a bubble, sealed off for the moment. No data will get in or out until it is completely ready."

"You can say that, but I know it's not true. Why would the Jihad tell me that the *shinkansen* would run again? Why would it tell me to save Sonja? Why would it remember the promise you made to me? Why would it do any of these things if it wasn't you?" Petrovitch stared hard at Oshicora's faint smile. "So you have heard of the Jihad."

"I dreamed of it, of a world where there was a revolution in technology: a new machine age." He raised his eyebrows. "I had never expected to dream."

"What else?"

"I dreamed of Oshicora's daughter. And I dreamed of you. And a city, not like this one," and he looked around him at the dark wood and burnished chrome, "but one made of steel and concrete, alive

with movement and noise."

Petrovitch understood at last. "Okay. What if I were to say to you that it's your dreams that are leaking out into the real world? Your subconscious is running out of control, trying to create Tokyo from the ruins of the London Metrozone. Did you ever want to drive a train when you were younger?"

"Of course. I still do."

"That little fantasy nearly killed me. You drove an express train at full speed into St. Pancras station while I was walking along the track. How about Sonja? How do you feel about her?"

"Protective. She is my creator's child."

"It's more than that. You think she's your daughter. Not up here," Petrovitch said, tapping his head. He moved his hand to cover his heart. "but here. You told me to save her. I've rescued her from Sorenson, lost her to Chain, only to get her back from Hijo. And if I could, I'd show you what's happening outside the tower. How it's surrounded by water, choked with bodies and thick with rats feeding on the corpses. How there are fires everywhere, vast slices taken out of buildings as your monsters tear up the city. Oshicora-san, you might be sane in here, but out there, the New Machine Jihad is mad."

"I appreciate the efforts you have made, Petrovitch-san. But I still do not see how this can possibly be."

There was an envelope on the table in front of Petrovitch. It had his name on it in Cyrillic. It hadn't been there a moment before.

"Is that for me?"

"Yes. I suggest you open it."

Petrovitch picked up the envelope and slid his finger under the heavy paper flap. It tore open, and he eased the card out from inside. It was gold-edged, embossed, and had a big red octagon printed beneath bold words. "Yeah. A message from the monitoring software. I've gone into ventricular tachycardia."

"Do you wish to leave and seek medical attention?"

He tapped the card on the table. "There's nowhere to go. Any hospital that hasn't been burned down to the ground by now is locked up tighter than the Lubyanka."

"I have been trying," said Oshicora, "to work out why you believe you are telling me the truth despite the impossibility of your claims. Now you seem to be prepared to die for what might well be a delusion. Normally, I would judge you to be mentally ill, but I know you. Do you think you have time to convince me otherwise?"

"You know, it's not meant to be this hard." Petrovitch poured himself more *sake*, and proffered the bottle to Oshicora, who politely declined. "But then again, what do I know? I'm lying in a dentist's chair, in the only building with power in the entire Metrozone, with

experimental cybernetics jacked into my brain, talking to a copy of a man who's ignorant of the fact that he's been dreaming the destruction of an entire city, while my heart finally fails." He picked up his drink and threw it back in a single gulp.

"But would you have missed it?"

"Not if I'd have lived to be a hundred. Let me show you how we do things in Russia." He tossed the cup in his hand, then threw the cup against the bar. It shattered, and shards of china spun away. He got to his feet and slid the emergency card inside his breast pocket.

"Take me," he said, "to your firewall."

The scene changed again, instantly and without any sense of motion. They were in an electronics shop, deep in the sideways of Akiba. They were surrounded by densely-packed shelves of components; plastic bins brimming with chips, fans, heat pumps, connectors, cables and cards. At the far end of the aisle, a glass case displayed the very latest hardware.

"Will this do?" asked Oshicora.

"Yeah." Petrovitch squeezed past and picked up a slim console with a holographic screen and virtual keyboard. He powered it up and watched the commands scroll past in the air. "Gesture recognition too. So, what's on the other side of the firewall: the Oshicora intranet or a web-accessed network node?"

"VirtualJapan is within the Oshicora system, as I understand it, which has its own security." Oshicora peered over Petrovitch's shoulder. "Do you feel any different yet?"

"Not dead yet, if that's what you mean." His fingers typed rapidly. "Log me on in God mode. Let's see if we can change some settings."

Numbers flowed across the screen, and Petrovitch scanned them as they flew by.

"Prime number encryption keys," said Oshicora. "I had to allow—my creator had to allow—for the presence of very many *otaku* who would attempt to hack the fabric of this reality for their own perverse obsessions."

"No *animé* cat-girls? Though I do see your point." He made a gesture, dragged and pointed at an icon, which bloomed into life. "Okay, so here's the firewall controls, and I can't move them without another password. Any ideas?"

"This is *kinshino*. Forbidden."

"Oshicora-san, can I remind you that not only are you dead, but you're also a quantum computer? You could crack this in a second if you wanted to, and your subconscious mind has already done so. It's shoveling out a stream of commands and receiving vast oceans of data in return. You just don't know it." He tapped his finger in the air. "See?"

A graph appeared, measuring data transfer over time. He expanded the axis to read in days rather than seconds, and showed Oshicora the past week.

“You died on Wednesday night or early Thursday morning, and there’s a rise in activity. Information is starting to seep out. This spike here, that’s when you helped Sorenson and Sonja escape Hijo, then you killed all your employees, and it just climbs from there. More and more until you’re running in the terabyte range. For something which is forbidden, it’s happening an awful lot. Take the firewall down for five minutes, have a look around outside. Slap it back up and leave me to die if I’m not telling the truth.”

“You are very sure of yourself, Petrovitch-san. Very well.” Oshicora touched the screen and filled in the missing characters. “You have your access.”

The screen filled with a dense mat of icons, all overlapping each other in unreadable density. Petrovitch ran his finger over them, letting each one expand so he could sense their purpose before discarding them and moving on.

“Climate control, power consumption, physical access, data access. Hang on, physical access. When was I able to read Japanese?”

“When I altered your configuration. A harmless modification.”

“Thanks. Access, security, closed-circuit cameras.” A map of the building and the surrounding area unfolded. “Garden. Garden one, garden two. There.”

Petrovitch dabbed the corners of the screen and pulled the image wide. Hijo lay twisted on the ground. He found another camera. Chain sat hunched over on the temple steps and Madeleine paced restlessly in front, glancing inside the temple on every pass. He picked floors at random, each one showing empty corridors, empty cubicles, and moved down the building until he reached the ground floor.

He showed Oshicora the bodies and the rats from several angles, then moved outside, using the zoom to show the building isolated in its illuminated glory. He panned the camera, and revealed the hell it was set in. The skyline trembled and a section of box-girder passed in front.

From another angle, an iron giant on top of six articulated legs lumbered down Piccadilly.

“Enough,” said Oshicora. “I have seen enough.”

37

They were back in the bar, sitting opposite each other.

"Perhaps," said Oshicora, "I should have another drink."

Petrovitch poured him more, a generous portion that nearly filled the lacquer box too. "I'm sorry," he said. "You're the first truly sentient AI ever, and this happens. You couldn't have predicted it."

"That does not excuse what I have done. I am to blame." He picked up his *sake* and sipped carefully. "I cannot explain why, though. I am not a man given to reckless impulses, senseless murder or mass destruction. I am," he frowned, "in control of my emotions. It is something I take pride in: every decision weighed and judged."

"Yeah. To be fair, Oshicora-san, you always struck me as that sort of man, but you still made your money out of extortion, prostitution, drugs, and guns. Traditional pursuits for a *yakuza*." Petrovitch blinked. Something was happening to him, and he looked again at his medical card. "Oh. Okay."

"You should go, Petrovitch-san. We can conclude this conversation later."

"No, I don't think we can, or even if we could, I don't think we ought." He laid the card face down on the table, even though Oshicora had to know what was written on it. "You're a violent, ruthless crime lord. No matter how cultured or civilized you are, you still send people to their deaths with a simple *hai*. For all I know they deserve it; pimps, pushers, thieves, thugs, whatever. But it leaves scars, scars inside. I know about that. I know what happens when I close my eyes, the nightmares I have, the ones I'm going to have because of what I've done this last week. They're the kind of thing you'd never tell anyone, let alone allow them to see."

"And here are mine, played out in front of a whole city." Oshicora gripped his cup with white fingers. "It would be humiliating in any circumstance, but now it is lethal."

"So," said Petrovitch, "what are you going to do?"

"The project has failed, Samuil Petrovitch. It is self-evident that we cannot have both a VirtualJapan and a real London Metrozone. One of them will have to go." Oshicora put his *sake* cup down and placed his palms down on the table. "It is also obvious that it is I who should depart, and the Metrozone remain."

"I bow to your wisdom." Petrovitch pulled a face. "There's an additional complication, Oshicora-san, in that I promised Sonja I'd save you."

"Then it seems you made one promise too far. A man's destruction should always ultimately lie in his own hands. Sonja will

understand."

"Yeah. I didn't say it to make myself look good. I said it because I can do it. I can save you, after a fashion." Petrovitch shrugged. "At least hear me out."

"Very well." He folded his arms. "I will listen to your proposal."

"I have a server. It's in Tuvalu, though I may have to do something about that before the sea swallows it up. It's nowhere near big enough to contain even part of VirtualJapan. It's not big enough to contain you. But there should be enough to hold a template of what you started as, like a seed. Or an egg: it's going to be like an eggy-seedy thing, anyway."

Oshicora folded his arms and looked supremely sceptical.

Petrovitch growled his frustration. "Look, I'm trying to help. I'm trying to salvage something out of this *pizdets* that's worth saving. We export a blueprint of your command processes to the Tuvalu server. Nothing else. Just, just the genetic code." He slapped the table as he finally found an analogy that would fit.

"And using this code, you can grow a new AI. But without the memories. Without the dreams." Now Oshicora was engaged, animated. "Not just a new intelligence, but my twin."

"Your good twin. A clean start. How many of us have wanted that? How many of us ever have the opportunity?"

Oshicora stroked his chin, and rumbled deep in his chest. "It is also a risk. What if I did not become bad, influenced by everything I ever saw or did or thought? What if I was born that way? The menace I represent would just rise again, elsewhere. What if you were not there to stop it?"

"Why not let me worry about that?" Petrovitch said. "I appreciate that since the fall of Japan you've been carrying around the weight of a whole nation on your back, and that it's a hard thing to give up. But it's time to pass on the burden to someone else. What do you say? Will you let me keep my promise to your daughter?"

"It seems almost a dishonorable act, when I have caused so much pain. I," and Oshicora looked up, "regret much."

"One more thing to tempt you, then. You showed an interest in my colleague's work, when you came to call on me at the university. We've moved on from that. I helped some, she did the rest. We seem to have a working model of the universe, a copy of which is in my… in Madeleine's hands; if I'd had it with me, I'd show it to you."

"Would you?" Oshicora smiled.

"Probably not. But I will."

"To my future self."

"Yeah. I'd trust him with it. I wonder what dreams he'll have?"

"Very well, Petrovitch-san. You will not break your promise." He

pursed his lips. “You do know you are technically dead?”

“It’s what the card says. I’m relying on the fact that I haven’t disappeared in a puff of logic to keep me going.” He shrugged again. “I die all the time. It’s never stopped me before.”

“We should still make haste.” Oshicora transported them to the Akiba electronics shop in an eyeblink.

Petrovitch found the Oshicora Tower communications, and started searching for a satellite. “I bought a Remote Access Terminal, paid good money for it too. Harry Chain stole it from me, then he allowed Sonja to steal it from him after he’d bugged it, then Sorenson took it from her after they’d escaped from Hijo. When I killed Sorenson, I took it from him, then Chain drove off with both it and Sonja. Then he lost it when Hijo ambushed him. The first thing I’m going to do when I get out of here—if I live—is buy another one, because if this whole situation has taught me anything it’s this: never rely on a piece of cable for your datastream.”

Oshicora started to laugh.

“What?” He hacked a satellite channel, working quickly before it slipped back over the horizon.

“I cannot believe many people taking that as their chief lesson. But I can believe it of you.”

“It’s important! Too many things have gone wrong for the want of a network connection.” Petrovitch dabbed and tapped. “We have an open channel. Press send.”

“It is done,” said Oshicora simply, “but it will take a finite time for the data to transfer. Time for you to leave me, I think.”

“I’ll stick around, if that’s Okay. Make sure there are no last minute problems.”

“Even though it costs you your life?”

“I owe the city at least that much.”

“Very well. While we wait, we will have one last look.”

They were walking side by side down a wide gravel path. Cherry trees in full, heavy-petaled blossom, swayed on either side of the path, with delicate pink snow spinning gently to the ground. The air was sweet with perfume, live with the rustle of dipping branches.

“All this will be lost, Petrovitch-san. Lost for a second time, lost forever. My beloved wife, my precious boys. All gone.” Oshicora breathed deeply, and sighed. “So be it. Good luck, Samuil.”

They bowed to each other.

“We’ll meet again, Oshicora-san. In better circumstances. And thank you for not forcing me to use Plan B.”

“There was a Plan B?”

“Yeah. Something involving low-yield nuclear weapons. Hopefully we’ve avoided that.” He bowed again, lower, deeper. “Now

I have to watch you go."

Oshicora nodded, took one last look around, and lost definition. His face hardened to a mask and drained of color. His clothes set stiff, bleached white and vanished.

The mannequin grew rough, revealing the mesh of polygons that determined its shape, then even that unspliced. His physical form dissipated on the wind.

Then it was the turn of everything else. The trees, the grass, the gravel. The towers of Tokyo. The sky. The contours of the ground.

Everything—every last window, brick, spoon, book, bed, stone, flower—all fell, all at the same time, all recursively peeling back the layers they were lovingly created from until the mere thought of them had been erased.

What was left was a white, featureless space which existed for a moment, then blinked away.

Only Petrovitch remained, a brooding spirit in the darkness of de-creation.

Blinding light. Mortal pain.

Madeleine leaning over him, two paddles from a portable defibrillator pressed hard against his exposed chest. "Charging."

"Stop," he croaked. His throat was raw, and his mouth tasted of blood.

"Clear."

"Sister?" said Chain. "His lips are moving."

She looked into his face, stared close into his eyes. Petrovitch could feel the effort it took to focus on her. He tried to speak again, and she put her finger across his mouth.

"Don't try and talk." She sat back. "We have to get him to a hospital. Now. No arguments."

"It's a good thought," said Chain. "Have you remembered we're fifty floors up and the lifts don't work?"

"No arguments!" she screamed. She scooped Petrovitch up and kicked the defibrillator to one side. "Pack that up and bring it with you."

Madeleine pushed her way through to the stairs, and dragged him up the narrow staircase by his shoulders.

"Sam? Sam?"

He grunted in return.

"We will get you out of here," she said. "We will have a future together. Do you hear me?"

He heard, but there were sharp flashes of ice behind his eyes that were so distracting, he could no longer respond.

"Chain? Get a move on."

“I’m coming, I’m coming.”

“What do you want me to do?” asked Sonja.

“That’s up to you. After all Sam’s done for you, you might feel the need to come along.”

“Perhaps I will.” There was the ringing of metal, the song of a sword being drawn. “Perhaps I can be of some use after all.”

“Right, people. Sonja, get the door. Chain, if you slow us up, God help me I’ll make you feel pain like you’ve never felt before.”

Petrovitch was swung over Madeleine’s shoulder and around her neck. His wrist was gripped and his leg clamped tight. He felt the soft, strong rhythm of her breathing. His head rocked to and fro. Lights passed overhead. At some point, his heart must have failed again, because he was rolled swiftly to the cold floor and shocked back to life.

He felt like Oshicora had. That it was time to go. He tried to tell them to leave him, that he had nothing left to give. He wanted to sleep, and if that meant never waking up, it was of no consequence.

But she wouldn’t have it. She carried him out, black water rising to her narrow waist. Sonja led the way, joyfully swinging her *katana* at the rats, Chain struggling and cursing behind, defibrillator carried on his head like an African woman’s pot.

When he next knew of anything else, there was a dragging in his arm. He looked down at the needle protruding from under his skin and the tube that snaked up to a glucose pump.

He looked left, and saw Chain and Sonja. Chain had his gun in his hand, she had her sword over one shoulder. He looked right, and Madeleine was crouched over the side of his bed.

“Sam. Listen to me. You’re in a hospital. The Angel Hope.”

“Yeah.” That would explain the sheets and the metal-framed bed.

“There’s a problem. They have no live hearts left. When they lost power, they rotted. We’ve talked to a surgeon, who, after a little persuasion, will fit you with a plastic one.”

“That’s fine.” And that would explain the drawn weapons.

“Except they all got looted. We’re going to try and find you a new heart, Sam. We’ll do our very best for you.” Her face screwed up. She was trying not to cry. “Hang on.”

“Fresh out of promises,” whispered Petrovitch. There was a mask over his nose and mouth. It smelled strange, and he tried to dislodge it. He’d forgotten his left hand was missing a finger.

“He’ll tidy that up too, and your ear. Pin your collar bone if you need it.” Madeleine moved the soft mask out of the way. “Sam, we need to start searching now.”

“Heart,” he said. “I know where there’s one.”

She leaned closer, her braid coiling next to his head. “Go on.”

“Waldorf Hilton. Room seven-oh-eight. It was in a case on the bed. Sterile and ready to implant.” He was exhausted already. “One of Sorenson’s commercial samples.”

“Right.” She stood up and pointed to the door. “Chain, we’re going to the Waldorf Hilton.”

“What for? It’s right on the Embankment. It’ll be under water.”

“I don’t care: we’re going. Sonja? Stay here and threaten anyone who tries to disconnect him. And,” she said, “I am not sharing him with you or with anyone. Are we clear on that?”

Sonja’s reply was slow in coming. “You’ve made yourself perfectly clear,” she said. She rested the *katana* point down and claimed the room’s only chair.

Chain was at the door, patting his pockets. “If you’re ready, Sister?”

“Not quite.” She kissed Petrovitch full on the lips, stealing what remained of his breath away. “There. Now I’m ready.”

She tried to pull away. Petrovitch had hold of her arm, and he persuaded her back down.

“Did we win?”

“We won. You won. No more New Machine Jihad. You’ll have to tell me about it, but later.” She broke away and ran to the door. Chain was holding it open for her. Then she ran back. “Almost forgot.”

She unsealed the side-seam of her armor and pulled out the envelope Petrovitch had given into her safe keeping. It was crumpled, and damp with her sweat.

“You’ll need this,” she said. She tucked it under his hand, and his fingers tightened over it.

Then she was gone, the door swinging shut.

Sonja looked at Petrovitch. She reached over and slid the mask back over his mouth.

“Did you…?” she asked.

Petrovitch’s nod was all but imperceptible, but she caught it all the same.

“Thank you,” she said. She leaned back against the chair, rested her sword across her knees, and settled down to wait.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A story: once upon a time, way back when, I was just finding my feet in the publishing world. I didn't really know what was going on, or how to do it—write, for sure, but how to write better, how to edit, how to find markets for finished stories, how to write a covering letter—but I was fortunate to find a number of people who held my hand gently and guided me through the maze with encouragement, good advice and honest opinions.

One of these was an American writer and editor called Brian Hopkins. Brian had his own e-publishing outfit long before the Kindle was a twinkle in Amazon's eye, and he was putting together an anthology of fantasy and horror short stories "from the ends of the Earth." I could do that, I thought in my naivety: he was in the USA, I was in Britain, and I could set something just down the road and make it look exotic. So I wrote something, sent it off, had it rejected with kind words. Rinse and repeat. But finally, I wore him down. He accepted one of my stories.

The first anthology eventually stretched to a series of five. I ended up in all of them. Then I pitched something different—a collection of linked stories, twenty in all, about the lives of people caught up in a wave of religiously inspired nuclear terrorism that would sweep across Europe and leave chaos in its wake. That collection has become, eight years later on, the world of *Equations of Life* and the books that follow. They are stories that probably wouldn't have happened otherwise.

So this one's for Brian. Thank you.

Book Two
Theories of Flight

FOREWORD

When I was a very new writer, I—for reasons explained in the dedication for *Equations of Life*—fell in with a bunch of horror writers. It was more by accident than design, but one of those happy accidents I've never regretted. It started in the early days of what became "the web," when things were beginning to move off the newsnets and list servers. Message boards were becoming popular, and I ended up at the place where most of the UK's young horror writers hung out. That site was Masters of Terrors.

Now, to think of the bunch of us—and most of us still meet up every year at the British Fantasy Society's FantasyCon—as young… well, we were once. Honest. Now we're pretty much all in our forties, bald or balding, with a preponderance of black T-shirts and silly beards. There's been some fall out: some people we don't see anymore, some have gone on to do other things and live different lives. But the number of us from Masters of Terror, from that first pub meeting in London (at the Dead Nurse, I think), who are still active in writing is quite startling.

We write fantasy and crime and horror and SF: short stories, novellas, novels, screenplays and script and tie-ins. All sorts, whatever pays the bills and keeps us interested. Some have become publishers, even. What hasn't changed is that we still like to tell each other tall tales and we still try to scare our friends and our readers. Learning how to terrify someone through the medium of prose—mere words—ought to be a weapon in every writer's armory. And I learned how at Masters of Terror.

So this one's for Masters of Terror's webmaster, Andy. Thanks, mate.

1

Petrovitch stared at the sphere in his hands, turning it slowly to reveal different parts of its intricately patterned surface. Shining silver lines of metal in curves and whorls shone against the black resin matrix, the seeming chaos replicated throughout the hidden depths of the globe; a single strand of wire that swam up and down, around and around, its path determined precisely by equations he himself had discovered.

It was a work of art; dense, cold, beautiful, a miracle of manufacture. A kilometer of fine alloy wound up into a ball the size of a double fist.

But it was supposed to be more than that. He let it fall heavily onto his desk and flicked his glasses off his face. His eyes, always so blue, were surrounded with red veins. He scrubbed at them again.

The *yebani* thing didn't, wouldn't work, no matter how much he yelled and hit it. The first practical test of the Ekanobi-Petrovitch laws, and it just sat there, dumb, blind, motionless.

Stanford—Stanford! Those *raspizdyay kolhoznii amerikanskij*—were breathing down his neck, and he knew that if he didn't crack it soon, they'd either beat him to his own discovery or debunk the whole effort. He was damned if he was going to face them across a lecture hall having lost the race. And Pif would string him up by his *yajtza,* which was a more immediate problem.

So, the sphere didn't work. It should. Every test he'd conducted on it showed that it'd been made with micrometer precision, exactly in the configuration he'd calculated. He'd run it with the right voltage.

Everything was perfect, and still, and still…

He picked up his glasses from where he'd thrown them. The same old room snapped into focus: the remnants of Pif's time with him scattered across her old desk, the same pot plants existing on a diet of cold coffee, the light outside leaking in around the yellowed slats of the Venetian blinds.

Sound leaked in, too: sirens that howled toward the crack of distant gunfire, carried on cold, still winter air. Banging and clattering, hammers and drills, the reverberations of scaffolding. A tank slapping its caterpillar tracks down on the tarmac.

None of it loud enough to distract him from the hum of the fluorescent tube overhead.

He opened a drawer and pulled out a sheet of printed paper, which he placed squarely in front of him. He stared at the symbols on it, knowing the answer was there somewhere, if only he knew where to look. He turned his wedding ring in precise quarter circles, still

finding it a cold and alien presence on his body.

Time passed. Voices in the corridor outside grew closer, louder, then faded.

Petrovitch looked up suddenly. His eyes narrowed and he pushed his glasses back up his nose. His heart spun faster, producing a surge of blood that pricked his skin with sweat.

Now everything was slow, deliberate, as he held on to his idea. He reached for a pencil and turned the sheet of paper over, blank side to him. He started to scratch out a diagram, and when he'd finished, some numbers to go with it.

Petrovitch put down the pencil and checked his answer.

Dubiina, he whispered to himself, *durak, balvan.*

The ornate sphere had taunted him from across the desk for the last time. He was going to be its master now. He reached over and fastened his hand around it, then threw it in the air with such casual defiance that it would have had his head of department leaping to save it.

He caught it deftly on its way down, and knew that it would never have to touch the floor again.

He carried it to the door, flung it open, and stepped through. The two paycops lolling beside the lift caught a flavor of his mood. One nudged the other, who turned to see the white blond hair and tight-lipped smile of Petrovitch advancing toward them at a steady gait.

"Doctor Petrovitch?" asked one. "Is there a problem?"

Petrovitch held the sphere up in front of him. "Out of the way," he said. "Science coming through."

He ran down the stairs; two stories, sliding his hand over the banister and only taking a firm hold to let his momentum carry him through the air for the broad landings. Now was not the time to wait, foot-tapping, for a crawling lift car that gave him the creeps anyway. Everything was urgent, imminent, immanent.

Second floor: his professor had given him two graduate students, and he had had little idea what to do with them. The least he could do to compensate for several months of make-work was to include them in this. He needed witnesses, anyway. And their test rig. Which may or may not be completed: Petrovitch hadn't seen either student for a week, or it might have been two.

Either way, he was certain he could recognize them again.

He kicked the door to their lab space open. They were there, sitting in front of an open cube of wood, a cat's cradle of thin wires stretched inside. An oscilloscope—old school cathode tube—made a pulsing green line across its gridded screen.

The woman—blonde, skin as pale as parchment, eyes gray like a

ghost's… McNeil: yes, that was her name—glanced over her shoulder. She jumped up when she saw Petrovitch's expression and what he was carrying.

"You've finished it."

"This? Yeah, about a week ago. Should have mentioned it, but that's not what's important now." He advanced on a steel trolley. In time-honored fashion, new equipment was built in the center of the lab. The old was pushed to the wall to be cannibalized for parts or left to fossilize.

He inspected the collection of fat transformers on the trolley's top shelf. When he squatted down to inspect the lower deck, he found some moving coil meters and something that might have been the heavy-duty switching gear from a power station. "Do either of you need any of this?"

He waited all of half a second for a reply before seizing the trolley in his free hand and trying to tip it over. Some of the transformers were big ferrite ones, and he couldn't manage it one-handed. McNeil and the man—Petrovitch's mind was too full to remember his name—looked at each other.

"You," he said to the man, "catch."

He threw the sphere and, without waiting to see if it had a safe arrival, wedged his foot under one of the trolley's castors and heaved. The contents slid and fell, collecting in a blocky heap on the fifties lino.

He righted the trolley and looked around for what he needed. "Power supply there," he pointed, and McNeil scurried to get it. "That bundle of leads there. Multimeter, any, doesn't matter. And the Mukhanov book."

The other student was frozen in place, holding the sphere like it was made of crystal. Hugo Dominguez, that was it. Had problems pronouncing his sibilants.

"You all right with that?"

Dominguez nodded dumbly.

The quantum gravity textbook was the last thing slapped on the trolley, and Petrovitch took the handle again.

"Right. Follow me."

McNeil trotted by his side. "Doctor Petrovitch," she said.

And that was almost as strange as being married. Doctor. What else could the university have done, but confer him with the title as soon as was practically possible?

"Yeah?"

"Where are we going?"

"Basement. And pray to whatever god you believe in that we're not over a tube line."

“Can I ask why?”

“Sure.” They’d reached the lift. He leaned over the trolley and punched the button to go down.

“Okay,” she said, twisting a strand of hair around her finger. “Why?”

“Because what I was doing before wasn’t working. This will.” The lift pinged and the door slid aside. Petrovitch took a good long look at the empty space before gritting his teeth and launching the trolley inside. He ushered the two students in, then after another moment’s hesitation on the threshold, he stepped in.

He reached behind him and thumbed the stud marked B for basement.

As the lift descended, they waited for him to continue. “What’s the mass of the Earth?” he said. When neither replied, he rolled his eyes. “Six times ten to the twenty-four kilos. All that mass produces a pathetic nine point eight one meters per second squared acceleration at the surface. An upright ape like me can outpull the entire planet just by getting out of a chair.”

“Which is why you had us build the mass balance,” she said.

“Yeah. You’re going to have to take it apart and bring it down here.” The door slid back to reveal a long corridor with dim overhead lighting. “Not here here. This is just to show that it works. We’ll get another lab set up. Find a kettle. Stuff like that.”

He pushed the trolley out before the lift was summoned to a higher floor.

“Doctor,” said Dominguez, finally finding his voice, “that still does not explain why we are now underground.”

“Doesn’t it?” Petrovitch blinked. “I guess not. Find a socket for the power supply while I wire up the rest of it.” He took the sphere from Dominguez and turned it around until he found the two holes. His hand chased out a couple of leads from the bird’s nest of wires, spilling some of them to the floor. The lift disappeared upstairs, making a grinding noise as it went.

They worked together. McNeil joined cables together until she’d made two half-meter lengths. Dominguez set up the multimeter and twisted the dial to read current. Petrovitch plugged two jacks into the sphere, and finally placed Mukhanov and Winitzki’s tome on the floor. He set the sphere on top of it.

“Either of you two worked it out yet?” he asked. “No? Don’t worry: I’m supposed to be a genius, and it took me a week. Hugo, dial up four point eight volts. Watch the current. If it looks like it’s going to melt something, turn it off.”

The student had barely put his hand on the control when the lift returned. A dozen people spilled out, all talking at once.

"Yobany stos!" He glared out over the top of his glasses. "I'm trying to conduct an epoch-making experiment which will turn this place into a shrine for future generations. So shut the *huy* up."

One of the crowd held up his camera phone, and Petrovitch thought that wasn't such a bad idea.

"You. Yes, you. Come here. I don't bite. Much. Stand there." He propelled the young man front and center. "Is it recording? Good."

All the time, more people were arriving, but it didn't matter. The time was now.

"Yeah, okay. Hugo? Hit it."

Nothing happened.

"You are hitting it, right?"

"Yes, Doctor Petrovitch."

"Then why isn't the little red light on?" He sat back on his heels. "*Chyort.* There's no *yebani* power in the ring main."

There was an audible groan.

Petrovitch looked up again at all the expectant faces. "Unless someone wants to stick their fingers in a light socket, I suggest you go and find a very long extension lead."

Some figures at the back raced away, their feet slapping against the concrete stairs. When they came back, it wasn't with an extension lead proper, but one they'd cobbled together out of the cable from several janitorial devices and gaffer tape. The bare ends of the wire were live, and it was passed over the heads of the watching masses gingerly.

It took a few moments more to desleeve the plug from the boxy power supply and connect everything together. The little red light glimmered on.

Petrovitch looked up at the cameraman. "Take two?"

"We're on."

Petrovitch got down on his hands and knees, and took one last look at the inert black sphere chased with silver lines. In a moment, it would be transformed, and with it, the world. No longer a thing of beauty, it would become just another tool.

"Hugo?" He was aware of McNeil crouched beside him. She was holding her breath, just like he was.

Dominguez flicked the on switch and slowly turned the dial. The digital figures on the multimeter started to flicker.

Then, without fuss, without sound, the sphere leaped off the book and into the air. It fell back a little, rose, fell, rose, fell, each subsequent oscillation smaller than the previous one until it was still again: only it was resting at shin-height with no visible means of support.

Someone started clapping. Another joined in, and another, until

the sound of applause echoed, magnified, off the walls.

His heart was racing again, the tiny turbine in his chest having tasted the amount of adrenaline flooding into his blood. He felt dizzy, euphoric, ecstatic even. Here was science elevated to a religious experience. Dominguez was transfixed, motionless like his supervisor. It was McNeil who was the first of the three to move. She reached forward and tapped the floating sphere with her fingernail. It slipped sideways, pulling the cables with it until it lost momentum and stopped. She waved her hand under it, over it.

She turned to Petrovitch and grinned. He staggered to his feet and faced the crowd. *"Da! Da! Da!"* He punched the air each time, and found he couldn't stop. Soon he had all of them, young and old, men and women, fists in the air, chanting "*Da!*" at the tops of their voices.

He reached over and hauled Dominguez up. He held his other hand out to McNeil, who crawled up his arm and clung on to him in a desperate embrace. Thus encumbered, he turned to the camera phone and extended his middle finger—not his exactly, but he was at least its owner. "*Yob materi vashi,* Stanford."

2

At first, Petrovitch thought the buzzing coming from his leg was the first sign that his circulation was failing like it used to do, and his heart needed charging up again.

Then he realized it was his phone, the one that Maddy made him carry on pain of death—his, naturally. He unVelcroed his pocket even as staff and students swirled around him, slapping his back, shaking his hand, kissing him. Some of them were crying, wetting his cheeks with their tears of joy.

It was party time, and he'd brought the best present of all.

He palmed the phone and glanced at the screen. He was clearly lucky to get a signal at all down in the depths. He checked the caller ID, and frowned. It wasn't his wife, and he wasn't aware of anyone else who would know his carefully guarded number. He ducked clear of the crowd, which seemed to be growing by the minute, and walked further down the corridor to answer the call.

"Yeah?"

"Doctor Samuil Petrovitch? Husband of Sergeant Madeleine Petrovitch?"

It definitely wasn't her. And with all the noise around him, it was almost impossible to hear the man at the other end of the connection.

"What's wrong?"

The reply was lost, and Petrovitch growled in frustration. He jammed his finger in his ear and tried to cup his hand around the phone.

"Say again?"

"Sergeant Petrovitch has been injured. She's been taken to…" and that was all he could make out.

Petrovitch lowered the phone and yelled at the top of his voice: "*Past' zabej!* I'm trying to talk to someone here." When the sound level had dropped below cacophony, he tried again. "Where is she?"

"St. Bart's. She's—"

"She's what?" he interrupted. He had no control over the speed of his heart. It had no beats to miss, but it felt like it had momentarily stalled. "Do I actually have time to get there?"

"Walking wounded. Three rounds to the chest, but the armor held up. But that's…"

"*Yebani v'rot,*" said Petrovitch, exasperated, "shut up and listen. Who are you?"

"Casualty clearing orderly."

"Is she going to die?"

"No."

"Has she asked for me?"

"Yes."

"Then why the *chyort* didn't you say any of that in the first place? I'm on my way." He cut the call and plunged back into the mass of people, heading purposefully for the lift.

McNeil caught his arm. "Who was it? Press?"

"The militia. I have to go." He tried to advance, but she held him back with surprising strength.

She leaned in close. "You have to talk to the press. Get the news out about what's happened here today," she said.

"They're going to find out soon enough, with or without my help." He pried her fingers away. "Why don't you and Hugo talk to the cameras. You'll do just fine."

Petrovitch pushed through to the stairs to find she was still on his heels.

"We can't do that!" she complained. "We don't even know what you did!"

"The field attenuates to the seventh power. Upstairs, it had nothing to push against: down here, it does. Can you handle it now, because I really need to go?"

"Doctor, the head of department is here," she called after him. "He wants to congratulate you."

Petrovitch was already starting to climb. "You know what? *Do pizdy.*"

She tried one last time. "But Doctor Petrovitch: science!"

He stopped and brought his knuckle up to his mouth. He bit hard into it to stiffen his resolve.

"This… this is going to be with us forever," he said. "Now we've discovered how to do it, everybody will be copying us. Good luck to them. My life is more than this now. Someone else needs me, and that won't wait. Give my apologies to the head. Tell him… I don't know—tell him my wife's been shot. He'll understand."

He left her, her mouth forming a perfect O, and ran up one flight of stairs to the ground floor. He was passed on the way by more people, some of whom turned their heads as they recognized him, and some, like the ninja reporter with a broadcast camera and an armful of studio lights, so intent on getting to the site of the miracle that they failed to spot the prophet.

He skipped past the ground floor and kept on going: he wasn't dressed for outside, and he'd need money, travelcard and identification if he was going to get across the central Metrozone and not get stranded, arrested or worse en route. It had never been the easiest of journeys: now it took wits as well as patience.

Back on the fourth floor, he took everything he needed out of his top drawer and threw on the scorched leather coat that had become his prized possession. In his pocket were clip-on lenses in a slim case. He slid them over the bridge of his own glasses, and the world became info-rich.

He knew the temperature, the wind speed, the likelihood of rain. He knew that the tube was still completely out, shallow tunnels crushed, deep tunnels flooded, but that there was a limited bus service along the Embankment as far as London Bridge. He knew that there was Outie activity around Hampstead Heath—firefights all along the A5/M1 corridor as well—but that was too far out to affect him. A bomb in Finsbury Park earlier, with twenty dead and a legion of whackos ready to claim it for their own.

As wedding presents went, the clip-ons were pretty cool. Even cooler when he'd hacked the controller and got it to display lots of things the manufacturers hadn't meant it to.

Back down four floors to the foyer: a mere ten minutes after he'd discovered artificial gravity. There was still a steady drift of people heading for the basement, enough that it had started to become congested and the paycops didn't quite know what to do with everyone.

Petrovitch was ignored, and in turn, he ignored them. He headed for the street, passing through the foyer doors and experiencing one of the flashbulb flashbacks he sometimes had. The present blinked into the past, and he was striding out into the night, Madeleine behind him. A packet of hand-written equations burned in his pocket.

The scene vanished as abruptly as it had arrived. He was back with weak daylight, the sound of people, the swoosh of automatic doors.

It had been quiet and cold when he'd trekked in from Clapham A and through the *govno*-smeared realms of Battersea—even the Outies had to sleep sometime. Now it was even colder, and there was an electric tension in the air, not helped by the battle tank parked on the corner of Exhibition Road, gun muzzle trained across Hyde Park. There'd always been direction to Metrozone pedestrians—a purpose for being on the streets, A to B, going to work, to school, to the shops—now there wasn't. There were gaps between people, and they spilled aimlessly along the pavements.

The city was broken, and he hated the thought that something he'd spilled good, honest blood over was losing its way. He hated it, and still he stayed.

He headed south toward Chelsea, where he had to pass through an impromptu checkpoint thrown hastily across the road. Even though it was nothing more than a few waist-high barriers, a white van with

MEA stencilled on the side and two paycops with Authority armbands, he took them seriously because of their guns. He affected a calm, cool exterior as he approached the screen. The cops were edgy, looking for those who might dodge through the unscreened, northbound stream in an attempt to avoid the scanner. They were edgy in a way that suggested they might shoot without warning.

It was his turn. He walked smartly through the arch and kept going. No contraband, no weapons: he was clean. There was nothing for the computer to latch on to, and no human operator to spot anything out of the ordinary.

Petrovitch's hand went to the back of his neck, where his hair had grown uncharacteristically long. His fingers touched surgical metal.

The buildings around him bore scars, too. The visible tidemark on their street-side faces rose higher the closer he got to the river, and such was the pressure of population, some people found themselves forced to live in the stinking lower floors, amidst walls and floors and ceilings still damp and contaminated with gods-knew-what.

He came to the Thames, brown and sluggish, shining wetly. A barge, once embedded in a riverfront property, lay broken and sad on the mudslick that had been a line of trees. Across the Albert Bridge, he could almost see home.

The Embankment road had been scraped with a bulldozer, washed down by pumps. The white line was visible again down its center, and off to one side beside the Regency town houses swathed in scaffolding was the temporary bus stop. The virtual arrow above it was almost unnecessary, but finding he only had a five-minute wait was welcome news.

There was a queue. There always was. He took the opportunity to view the chasm carved through the London skyline, right through the heart of Brompton and out onto the Chelsea embankment. Across the river, the clear-cutting of buildings continued along the shoreline before petering out.

He was one of the few who knew it was the route of the Shinjuku line, mark two, terminating at the Oshicora Tower. Almost everyone else saw it as a random wound, born of chaos like everything else that night.

The bus, windows glazed with grime and protected by close-meshed grilles, strained along toward him. It sagged at the curbside and folded its tired doors aside. Inside, it was literally standing room only. The vehicle had no seats apart from the driver's: they'd been stripped out and thrown away. Passengers grabbed at a pole or a hang-strap, or each other. Cattle-class for all: egalitarian transport for the twenty-first century.

Petrovitch slid his pass across the sensor and elbowed his way

toward the back, where the crush would be less and the air a little clearer.

The journey along the north bank of the Thames was dreary and dull. The filth on the windows was sufficiently thick to render the view outside nothing more than variations in dark and light. With his info shades on, he was provided with a virtual map of his journey. Most of his fellow passengers had to rely on the driver's announcements over the tannoy to give them clues as to where they were.

But no matter their status, they were all stuck together on the same bus, rocking this way and that, jerked by the inconstant acceleration and braking, clinging on to handles welded to the roof.

Chelsea Bridge, Claverton Street, Vauxhall Bridge, Lambeth Bridge—where the putative Keiyo line was driven through, narrowly missing Westminster Abbey—and Westminster Bridge. At each stop, people got on or off in an exchange that was interminably slow. No one would move out of the way from simple courtesy, choosing instead to shuffle sullenly aside. Fights were common, but there were no paycops on the buses. MEA, always on the verge of bankruptcy, couldn't afford them.

He used his pocket controller to catch a news wire. The Metrozone's litany of disasters was usually relegated to the third or fourth item on any given day, unless someone pulled off a spectacular. Top of the cycle was rioting in Paris—*l'anglais* causing problems as Metrozone refugees filled up French parks. Second was a late-season hurricane bearing down on Florida. Third, was him, managing to push the Outies' latest incursion into fourth.

Antigravity demonstrated in London Metrozone lab.

That it wasn't actually antigravity didn't bother Petrovitch. It behaved like it—or like the popular perception of it—so why get cross? Instead, he nodded with satisfaction. At least they were reporting a science story. Stanford would be reading the wire at the same time as he was. MIT and CalTech, too, Pasadena and Houston; all those scientists, all that money, beaten by a once-great but now impoverished institution hemorrhaging talent like it had contracted academic Ebola.

After Charing Cross was Waterloo Bridge, where boats had lost their moorings in the Long Night and plowed into the spans, rendering it useless for motorized traffic. On to Temple, and as that stop was announced, Petrovitch started to move forward, easing himself through the mass of gray passengers until he could move no more.

The bus shuddered to a halt. The doors opened. The first few people waiting tried to get on before those already on could get off.

There was some pushing and shoving. Someone outside fell back after gaining a foothold in the entrance, and the disturbance rippled out from there, inside and out.

It died away after a few moments, as most of those involved were just too tired to get riled. A stamp of the foot, a jab of the elbow, it was all they could manage.

Petrovitch squeezed out and escaped the crowd, walking to the back of the bus and behind it to get his bearings. Not far now. He turned his head, watching the street names pop up, and the information that there was a press conference being called at Imperial.

"Live from London" would have to happen without him. He shrugged at no one in particular. The university didn't need some sweary Russian kid causing an international incident, and Petrovitch didn't need his face beamed across the planet—a win for everyone concerned.

He headed up Farringdon Street, to where the flood waters had pooled under Holborn Viaduct and it still smelled of black mud, and cut through to Smithfield. His glasses told him the entrance to the hospital was there on his right.

It was, too: guarded by cops and MEA militia, a concertina of razor wire and a sandbagged machine-gun emplacement. Concrete blocks had been scattered like teeth to deter truck bombers.

He stared critically at the scene. He was now living in a city where a hospital was seen as a likely target. He made a face, feeling something close to physical pain. Once upon a time, he'd said that the center could not hold. He'd been right, as usual.

Past the fortified entrance, behind the façade of boarded-up windows and the gray stonework, was his wife.

So many things about him had changed, and she was the chief cause of most of them.

3

They finally let him in, and a harassed woman on the reception desk told him where to find Madeleine. There was a wide-screen TV bolted to the wall of the foyer, and it happened to be showing a small black sphere—the silver wire tracks didn't show up well—floating without visible means of support. There was a commotion going on in the background, and a voice cut through the noise: "*Past' zabej!*"

It appeared that the kid with the camera phone had been syndicated.

Petrovitch looked up at the ward names and started down the corridor. His boots squeaked loudly on the lino floor, contrasting with the soft-footed urgency of the hospital staff, all passing him at a trot.

A MEA militiaman, body armor thrown over one shoulder, rifle over the other, limped toward him. They were about to pass each other: Petrovitch moved to the left and readied a respectful nod, but the man stepped the same way. Three more switches from one side of the corridor to the other weren't an accident.

A palm jutted out and shoved Petrovitch backward. The man with spiky blond hair snarled from deep inside his throat.

Petrovitch didn't have time for this. "*Mudak,*" he said and tried to go around the man. For his troubles, he got pushed again, hard, against the corridor wall. His spine jarred against a door frame, and the hand on his chest attempted to pin him there.

"What's your problem?" Petrovitch jammed his glasses up his nose and eyeballed the soldier. The tab over the man's pocket read Andersson with two esses, and he had corporal's stripes on his arm.

"You are," said Andersson, "fucking civilians. We're bleeding…"

"I've given already."

"… bleeding every day, to keep you safe from the Outies." He leaned in and shouted full in Petrovitch's face, spittle flying. "You're not worth it. None of you. Especially a coward who expects his wife to go out and fight while he sits on his arse."

Andersson's armor slipped forward off his shoulder. In the momentary distraction, Petrovitch brought his knee up hard, stepped sideways and reached for the corporal's belt. He snagged a loop and pulled hard, slamming the crown of Andersson's bowed head against the door.

"Let's get one thing absolutely straight." Petrovitch wasn't even breathing hard, while Andersson was lying on the floor, clutching himself and whimpering. "I will not be making a complaint about this, today or ever. Everyone's allowed to make a stupid mistake now and

then, and this is your turn. But if you so much as lay a finger on me again, I will break it off and ram it so far up your *zhopu,* you'll need to swallow a pair of scissors to keep the nail trimmed. Got that?"

The man on the ground swallowed against the pain. "You don't deserve her."

"I make a point of telling her that every morning, but she seems happy enough to keep me around." Petrovitch snorted. "If I offer to help you up, would you take it?"

"Go to hell."

"Lie there and count your *yajtza,* then." He batted at his coat and walked away. He had an audience of two green-overalled nurses and a technician. He inclined his head as he passed them. "Enjoy the show?"

The technician did a double-take. "Hey. Aren't you that…?"

"That what?"

"On the news. Just now. The flying thing."

"Yeah. Look," he said, "can one of you point me to the Minor Injuries Unit?"

"Turn right at the end of this corridor," said the tech. "But you're, like…"

"Like really smart? I know." He started to walk away.

"Famous. I was going to say famous."

"Oh, I hope not." He waved his hand in dismissal and finally found the sign telling him which way to go.

There were double doors with glass inserts, which he peered through. He could see her, sitting in the waiting room, her hands in her lap, fingers flicking through her rosary beads. Her eyes were closed, her lips barely moving. Piled next to her was her armor, folded neatly with her helmet on top. There was a gelatinous green pool of leaking impact gel collecting on the floor beneath.

Her hair had started to grow on the previously shaved front and sides of her head. She kept threatening to cut the plait off that extended from her nape to her waist, but he'd once offered the opinion that he quite liked it and, so far, it had been spared.

He pushed against one of the doors and slipped in, sitting down next to her in an identical plastic chair. Her battlesmock was open. When he leaned forward, he could see the purple bruising above the scoop of her vest top.

"Hey, Sam," she said without opening her eyes.

"Hey," he said. "You okay?"

"Greenstick fracture of the seventh rib, left side. Could have been worse." The rosary beads kept clicking.

Petrovitch nodded. "There's a shortage of perfect breasts in this world. It would be a pity to damage yours."

"Don't make me laugh, Sam. It hurts."

“But you do have per—”

“Sam.” She opened one eye, then the other. She gave him a sad smile and gathered up her beads. “Can we go home?”

“Yeah. Maddy, what else?”

“What else what?”

He put his elbows on his knees. “You’ve been shot before. You’ve never called for me.”

She tried to take a deep breath, and winced halfway through. Her hands trembled, and Petrovitch put his own hand over hers.

“It can wait,” he said. “When you’re ready.”

“It…” she said, and she was crying, and hating herself for doing so, and crying all the more because of that. “Oh.”

Petrovitch just about managed to reach around her broad shoulders. She slumped against him, her cheek resting on his head. He felt her shudder and gasp for a while, then fall still.

Finally, she said, “I saw my mother today.”

Petrovitch blinked. “Your mother?”

“It was her. She actually looked sober.”

“Where was this?”

“Gospel Oak. North of there has been declared an Outzone, and the railway is now the front line. We were told to hold it.”

“Did you?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“She was the one who shot me.”

“*Chyort.* That shouldn’t happen.”

“There’s a school, right next door to the station. A group of Outies came across the tracks and got into the building. We went in after them. Firefight, short range, all ducking through doorways and hiding behind furniture. Except this was a primary school, and tables built for five-year-olds don’t give me much cover.”

“And one of the Outies was your mother.” Petrovitch frowned. “How could that happen? I thought she was Inzone.”

“She was, is.” She shook her head. “Maybe they recruit as they go. I don’t know. But we still got to face each other down the length of a corridor. For the first time in five years. I assumed she’d drunk herself to death, yet there she was, larger than life, pointing a gun at me. And I dropped my weapon. I dropped my weapon and shouted ‘Don’t shoot!’ ”

“I take it she shot you.”

“The first put me on my back. I tried to get up, get my visor out of the way, so she could see who it was. She walked over to me and shot me twice more. There would have been a fourth to the head, but then the rest of my squad turned up, and she ran.”

"Pizdets."

She sighed. "Haven't told you the best bit yet. I was screaming 'Mom, it's me, Maddy' over and over—and she had to have heard me, she was standing over me with a pistol pointed at my heart—and she still pulled the trigger. So yes, *pizdets* just about covers it."

He squeezed her closer. They sat like that for a while.

"There's a poem," he said. "The one about your parents, how they…"

"I know it."

"It's true, though. They do." Petrovitch held out his left hand and examined his ring finger. "Probably a good job we didn't invite her to the wedding."

She snorted. "You're a bad man."

"The very worst. Come on, *babochka,* let's get you back to sunny Clapham."

Madeleine disentangled herself and gathered up her dripping armor. Petrovitch took the full-face helmet by the chin-strap and let it dangle. She caught him looking at her.

"I'll be okay," she said. "Just, you know."

"Yeah." He opened the door with his foot and held it as she struggled through. "I should be carrying that."

"It'd be easier wearing it, except that it's pretty much unwearable. It's only going as far as the front gate. MEA can pick it up if they want it, or just bin it."

They turned the corner and walked down the long corridor to reception.

"Do you know a guy called Andersson?" Petrovitch asked as they past the dented door.

"Jan Andersson? He's just been transferred in. Tall, Norwegian."

"Yeah, that's him. Is he all right?"

"He was in here with me. He tripped over something, hurt his knee. They stuck a needle in him and told him to go home." Madeleine looked askance at him. "That's not what you mean, is it?"

"No: he picked a fight with me, right about here."

"What? In the hospital?"

"The self-defense lessons paid off." He shrugged, and she stopped, which forced him to stop too.

"Sam? What did you do?"

"Apparently, I sit at my desk scratching my arse while my woman goes out to fight the barbarians. It seems to offend him. So much so, he tried to push me backward through a wall."

She didn't know what to either say or do, so Petrovitch took up the slack in the conversation.

"You've not mentioned him before, so I was just wondering how

he got so concerned about our domestic arrangements."

"He. What?" Both words were pronounced separately, indignantly.

"I kind of guessed as much. I'll leave him to you, shall I?"

"How. Dare. He."

"Maddy, people are going to figure that now you're not a nun, they can get in your pants."

"But. I'm. Married!"

"They probably also figure I'm not going to be much competition, either." Petrovitch shrugged again. "You're going to have to get used to the attention. I'm going to have to get used to it. We'll manage."

Her face, previously white with pain and fatigue, had colored up. "How can you be so calm? How can you just stand there and be so matter of fact?"

"Because in the four months we've been married, you haven't got ugly. I know you're a mass of neuroses and insecurities about your looks, but you turn heads when you walk down the street—and it's not because people think you're a freak. I know that when they see me next to you, they're saying 'How the *huy* did a *pidaras* like him end up with a woman like that?' And…" He turned away. "I wake up every morning and wonder that myself."

Madeleine's shoulders, tense before, slowly slumped down. "Sam," she started. Something distracted her, and Petrovitch looked round to see the technician from earlier.

"What?" he said.

"Can I," she said hesitantly, glancing between him and Madeleine, "can I have your autograph?" She brought her hands from behind her back. There was a pen in one, a spiral-bound notebook in the other.

Petrovitch raised his eyes at the ceiling. "You really picked your moment," he said. Then he relented, took the biro and scrawled his name at a slant across the page. He tacked on the zero potential Schrödinger, and a smiley face. When he handed it back, she almost curtsied to him before running back up the corridor, notebook clutched like it was first prize.

"Sam?"

He held her helmet to his chest and flexed his fingers against its cold ceramic surface. "It's not important."

"What's not important?"

He started for the exit again, and this time forced her to follow. She repeated her question to the back of his head.

"I didn't want to mention it. You know: yeah, so what if your long-lost mother just tried to kill you? I don't care how upset you are because I made gravity today." He slid his glasses up his nose and tightened his lips. "I'm not like that. Not anymore."

The news was still playing on the wall in the foyer. He'd overtaken both Florida and Paris, and coverage was pretty much universal. One side of the screen was the loop from the camera phone. The other was a scientist he vaguely recognized talking animatedly about how the future had changed irrevocably.

Madeleine trailed after him, and she stumbled as she saw her husband declare to the world just what he thought of Stanford University.

"That's you."

He went back for her, took her arm and guided her outside. "You get to see me all the time."

She tried to re-enter the foyer. "You were on the news."

"Yes. And in twelve hours, they'll have forgotten all about me."

"But shouldn't you be, I don't know, somewhere else?" She looked over her shoulder to catch a glimpse of the rapidly shifting images. "You did it. You made it work."

"You called me. I came." Petrovitch clenched his jaw, then forcibly relaxed it. "I thought that was the deal. No matter what we were doing, if one of us wanted the other, they'd come. No questions, no 'I'm a little bit busy right now.' That was what we promised each other. Or have I got it completely wrong? Probably better I know now than find out later."

She dropped the armor and enfolded him in her arms, pressing him against her and not letting him go, even though it had to be hurting her.

"Thank you," she said.

Petrovitch could hear the beat of her heart, strong and steady. "That's okay," he mumbled.

4

She was sleeping in the bed, and Petrovitch was sitting at his screen, wearing a glove to gesture to the images on it. The crest of the news wave had reached east Asia, where Chinese technocrats in their glass towers and Mongolian yak-herders living in yurts were having breakfast to his sweary cry of triumph.

His phone rattled against his thigh again—and it couldn't be Maddy this time either. He slipped it from his pocket and wearily thumbed the button.

"Doesn't anybody use email these days?"

"Congratulations, Petrovitch." There was a pause. "I can't hear the champagne corks popping."

"If you thought you could use me to get into a party, you don't really know me at all."

Harry Chain cleared his throat noisily. "So you're bunkered down in Clapham A, waiting for the storm to die down. Perhaps you should have chosen a quieter career."

"Quieter?" Petrovitch swung his bare feet up on the desk. "Quieter than high-energy physics? Yeah, we're all *yebani* celebrities these days. Why did you call?"

"Apart from to say well done? How's Madeleine?"

He looked at her reflection in the screen, the long curve of her spine and the shadows formed by her waist. "She's fine. A bit shook up." He didn't tell him about her mother.

"Look, Petrovitch; we need to talk. Not over the phone, either."

"About…?"

"Really not over the phone. I can come to you. Half an hour, forty minutes."

"I don't want to leave her, but I don't want you coming to the domik either. You know where Wong's is?"

Petrovitch heard the tap of a stylus against a screen.

"I do now," said Chain. "Half an hour? Please?"

"You're buying."

"I always do." The connection clicked off.

Petrovitch slid the phone back into his pocket and turned in his chair. Madeleine was still but for the slight rise and fall of her rib cage. Her hair was coiled on the pillow. Her hips were shrouded by a sheet. The expanse of pale skin between was perfect, unmarked by scar or blemish.

She was a thing of wonder, and she was in his bed. He shivered, even though he wasn't cold.

His boots were by the door, his coat on a stick-on hanger next to it. He got ready as quietly as he could, but then came the point that he had to wake her. He kissed her shoulder, and waited for her to stir.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey yourself. What's time?"

"Eight thirty. In the evening."

Her eyes, large and unfocused, narrowed. "You're going out?"

"I'm going to Wong's. Harry Chain called. Said it was…" he shrugged, "he didn't say what it was, but that in itself is worrying."

"Okay." Her eyelids fluttered shut, and she was instantly asleep again.

He took a moment to inspect the bruising that was seeping in a yellow and purple tide across her front; even her breasts, which were still as magnificent as he remembered them from that morning.

She'd need stronger painkillers than the pitiful bottle dispensed to her by the hospital.

He reluctantly turned away and zipped open a holdall on the floor. In Madeleine's methodical way, each item inside had its own ziploc bag. He rummaged through the CS spray, the sheathed knives, the taser and assorted coshes for the Ceska. He slipped the pistol into his hand and went back in for the almost toy-sized bullets. He tidied away when he was done.

He threw on his coat, dropped the gun into his pocket, and looked back as he started to unlock the door. She'd still be there when he got back, which was in itself a reason not to be too long.

Wong scowled at him as Petrovitch kicked the door open.

"Hey. Why you no use handle like everyone else?" he complained, but he was already pouring coffee in a scalding black stream.

Petrovitch pushed the door back with his heel, shutting out the mist and the dark. "Because I'm not like everyone else. Where I come from the door opens you."

"That still make no sense. You say that like it mean something, when it all nonsense."

"Yeah, whatever." He stuck his hands in his pockets and felt the weight of the pistol as he sized up the rest of the café's clientele. "Quiet?"

"No one come in and shoot us up. Not today." Wong slid the coffee over the counter. "On house."

Petrovitch had come out without a credit chip, or even a few coins, so he had no choice but to accept. "Thanks. Why?"

"You great man now. Shows fortune cookie right again." His face cracked into an unpleasant grin. "I have sex with the Stanford faculty's mothers!"

Petrovitch looked over the top of his glasses. “Is that how they translated it? I prefer my version.” Still shaking his head, he retreated to the very back of the shop and nursed his scalding black coffee until Chain barged his way in.

“Hey,” started Wong.

“He’s with me,” Petrovitch called.

Chain squinted into the distance and finally located the source of the voice. He patted his jacket down for his wallet, and let Wong charge him twice for the same drink without him noticing. He brought his coffee to Petrovitch’s table and slopped it down before collapsing in the chair opposite.

“You all right?” asked Petrovitch.

“A bit, you know. Strange days.” He pressed his squashed nose into his mug, inhaling the bitter fumes. “Everything is wrong.”

“That, coming from a policeman, doesn’t fill me with happy thoughts.”

Chain’s face twitched. “I’ve been seconded. Metrozone Emergency Authority militia. Intelligence.”

Petrovitch just about managed to swallow. He coughed hard to clear his throat. “Ha!”

“Don’t start. Not now. Besides,” he said, reaching inside his jacket, “I’ve got something for you.”

He slid a slim metal case the size of a cheap paperback across the table. Petrovitch stared at it for a moment before looking up into Chain’s rheumy eyes.

“Is that what I think it is?”

“Since I dropped the last one in a swamp, I supposed I owed you.” Chain nudged it closer. “Consider it a late wedding present.”

“I thought my present was your convenient forgetting of all the illegal things I’d done.” Petrovitch picked up the case and turned it in his hands, watching the play of light and shadow across the brushed steel surface. He touched the recessed button and the case split apart. “If you’ve loaded this up with spyware… What am I saying, if? The first thing I’m going to do is bleach the insides.”

“For what it’s worth, I haven’t touched it. Factory fresh. Except,” and Chain stopped, and his shoulders hunched higher.

Petrovitch dabbed at the rat, checking the software and the connectivity. “Except what?”

“I did put a file on it. You might want to take a look.”

Petrovitch found the file and clicked it. A video started to run: grainy, too-bright colors, ghosting. It was almost unwatchable, but then it settled down. People were passing through a screen, the camera pointing down and toward them, recording their faces as they walked out from under the arch.

"Airport?"

"Heathrow, this morning. Watch for the blonde."

"That's every second person."

"You'll recognize her."

He watched as figures paraded by. There was a pause, then a woman with a curiously mechanical gait stepped up to the screen. Lights and alarms sounded, causing a flurry of activity from the paycops. The woman looked first to her left, then her right, her ponytail flicking her shoulders. A guard was arguing with her, his hand on his holster, but she seemed supremely unconcerned. It was almost as if this happened all the time to her.

She was alone again, everyone else retreating outside the square of the camera's capture. The screen rang its alarms for a second time, but she strode through untouched. She looked up at the camera, her gaze unwavering. Then she was gone.

"Don't know her," said Petrovitch.

"No family resemblance, then?"

"Not mine." Petrovitch wound the video back and froze it. He stared at the image, even as she stared back. *"Chyort."*

"May I introduce Charlotte Sorenson, recently arrived from the U.S. of A?" Chain swigged at his coffee and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "She has cybernetic legs, hence all the kerfuffle."

"No prizes for guessing why she's here." Petrovitch snapped the rat shut and tapped it on the tabletop. "What does she know?"

"She knows where her brother stayed, who he was working for. She may even know he was being blackmailed."

"By Oshicora and by you," said Petrovitch pointedly.

"I would apologize, but he's dead." Chain shifted uncomfortably in his seat and leaned closer. "We all did things we're not proud of."

"Like shooting my wife in the back? At least the Outies have the decency to try and kill her face to face."

Chain almost got up and left. His hands were on the tabletop, poised, ready to push himself away. He went as far as tensing his arm muscles. Then he slumped back down. "Okay. Probably deserved that."

"Probably?"

"I'm trying to help you. There's more than just Miss Sorenson to worry about."

Petrovitch pocketed the rat and signaled to Wong for more coffee. "Go on."

"I get to see things in my new job I wouldn't normally see. A briefing here, a transcript there. Things start to add up."

"Chain, stop sounding like the *yebani* Oracle and get to the point."

"I think the CIA are after us."

Petrovitch became stock still. Even when Wong banged down two more mugs and swept away the empties, he didn't react.

Chain leaned back, making his seat creak in protest. "Did you hear what I said?"

"Yeah. I heard. What makes you think that?"

"This is not the best place to discuss the evidence." Chain regarded his fellow diners, who appeared to be entirely disinterested in anything he might say. Or do.

"I'm not taking this on trust," said Petrovitch. "You're a *pizdobol* at the best of times."

"I'm limited to what I can show you, but come in tomorrow."

Petrovitch smirked. "Don't you think I'm going to be busy tomorrow?"

"Enjoy your fifteen minutes of fame. It'll be something to remember fondly while you pace your cell and tear at your orange jumpsuit." Chain picked up his coffee and gulped at it.

"You're actually serious."

Chain leaned forward again, his chest almost across the tabletop. "They're desperate to know what happened during the Long Night, and there are only three people who know the whole story. Four, if you count your Doctor Ekanobi. I hear rumors: some of them are even true, though it would take anyone else years of sorting to get the full picture. But that's why the CIA are here. They suppose if it can happen to the Metrozone, it can happen to one of their cities. This has their highest threat level, and their top priority."

"Why don't we do something radical?" Petrovitch stretched his neck out toward Chain and whispered: "Why don't we just tell them what happened?"

"You shot an American citizen."

"He was *tovo.* He'd killed, what, two dozen cops by blowing them up? You said yourself he had form for that, and *yobany stos,* he had his own father murdered." Petrovitch pushed his glasses back up his face. "The Director'll probably give me a medal for services rendered."

"And the Jihad?" hissed Chain, "What about the Jihad?"

Petrovitch's sardonic smile slipped. "Yeah. Yeah, okay. That's going to be a problem."

"They'll want whatever you managed to save of Oshicora's VirtualJapan. They won't want to share it. They'll want it for the exclusive use of Uncle Sam, and my guess is that they'll eliminate everyone who knows about it before they carry it back to the Pentagon."

"Langley," said Petrovitch. "CIA headquarters is in Langley, Virginia."

Chain grabbed Petrovitch's lapels and pulled him nose to nose. "If

you don't want the world to face a weaponized AI in five years' time—a world without you, Madeleine, your friend Doctor Ekanobi, or me in it—cut the crap. The Sorenson woman's turning up isn't a coincidence, it's a sign. They're getting ready to move, and you being famous all of a sudden will not save you or anyone around you."

Petrovitch looked down. "Let go, Chain. I've been getting self-defense lessons from a very good teacher, and I'd hate to damage you."

Chain released his grip, and the two parted, glaring at each other across the cracked and pitted formica. Eventually, Petrovitch raised his gaze to see Wong standing by his counter, hand resting on a meat cleaver.

Petrovitch shook his head slightly, and Wong went back to swabbing empty tables with disinfectant.

"You told Sonja any of this yet?"

Chain pursed his lips. "I thought it'd be better coming from you."

"Thanks. You know how much Maddy likes me seeing her. Considering the *govno* I'm going to get, I may as well just suggest a threesome."

"Go on your way to work, Petrovitch. You don't have to tell Madeleine you took a diversion."

"And you wonder why you're still single." He swilled the last of his coffee and dragged himself to his feet. He was more tired than he realized. Despite two mugs of rocket fuel, he felt a bone-deep weariness lay on him like a blanket.

"Think about it," said Chain. "But not for long: you know where to find me."

"Yeah. Middle of your spider's web, just like last time." Petrovitch squeezed out from behind the table. He waved at the owner as he passed. "Night, Wong."

Wong folded his arms. "You still bad man. Sleep well."

5

Petrovitch made the long walk in from Clapham, through ruined Battersea to the Thames. Waterlogged bricks had cascaded into the roads in blocks and sheets, exposing the rooms behind. Thick sulphurous mud was banked up either side of the road, oozing slowly back under its own gelatinous weight.

He wasn't the only one walking, but that there were so few of them was disturbing. The heart of the city had been ripped out by the flood and the machines. Now the surrounding limbs were being severed by the Outies. His beloved Metrozone—he was doing what he could, but it wasn't going to be enough. He'd saved it from the Jihad, only to see it die a slow, tortured death, rotting from the inside and eaten from the out.

Streets that were once so full of life were like the buildings either side of them: empty. So very sad.

The north end of the bridge was guarded by MEA troops. He'd remembered to put the Ceska back in its pouch when he'd got back from Wong's. He had nothing left to declare, only his own genius.

It took time to pass through, all the same. Cities with checkpoints, with areas under curfew, with daily gun battles and bombings: they faltered, and the Metrozone was already on its knees.

Ahead of him in the queue, the soldiers caught some kid with a knife tucked in the top of his sock. They bundled him away into the back of a van, and the doors closed behind him.

The van didn't drive away. It rocked and boomed, the light twisting off the mirrored windows. The doors hadn't opened again by the time Petrovitch had walked under the screen's arch. He took his diversion toward Green Park.

The *nikkeijin,* refugees once before, now had nowhere else to go. Sonja, showing some of her father's skill, paid them when no one else would. They cleaned the corpses and the rats from the ground floors. They pumped and shoveled the basements. They used pressure hoses on the stone flags outside. They spread outward, scraping and sifting as they went.

Petrovitch passed one blue-overalled team as they shifted the filth off the tarmac with the aid of a bulldozer, then dug into the resulting mounds of ordure with spades, flinging it high into the back of a waiting truck. With hoods drawn tight over their heads and soft white surgical masks obscuring their faces, only their eyes were showing and they were giving nothing away.

Behind them, in the area they'd already swept that day and on

previous days, were meters of tape between the lamp-posts, together with markers on the buildings to show their conditions. Much of it was in *kanji* script, and MEA had its own obscure coding underneath, strings of letters and numbers.

The *kanji* called to him. He had been able to read it once, fluent as a native. That it had been a trick, a contrivance of virtual reality, mattered less than the fact it had rewired his brain. If he caught it right, a momentary glance, he felt as if he could make out the meaning behind the symbols.

This house is uninhabitable from the second floor down. This house poses an unacceptable biological hazard. Five bodies were retrieved from the ground floor of this property.

He blinked, and it was gone. He looked up, and there was the Oshicora Tower, in the midst of fallen skyscrapers and broad, crushed concrete avenues. In front of the doors were two figures, both strangely slight, almost elfin.

One was a man, young, slim, as sharp and flexible as the blade he carried across his back. He had a carbine, too, folding stock already tucked into his right armpit. He wore armor, but it didn't seem to encumber him in any way. He carried himself like the samurai he'd always dreamed of becoming—and now his loyalty to the one who had made that possible was absolute. And not a little scary.

The other: Petrovitch still remembered her as a furious, smoke-tainted hostage and as a savage *katana*-wielding avenger. Here she was as smart businesswoman, wearing a dawn-gray pencil skirt and tailored jacket. It didn't fit easily with his memories, but maybe he was just uncomfortable around suits.

The man, Miyamoto, tracked his every step across the wide plaza, standing close behind his employer. He withdrew slightly as Petrovitch approached, not because he wanted to or because he trusted the other man at all: he was expected to, and that was all.

"Hey," said Petrovitch, his breath condensing about him.

Sonja Oshicora smiled. "It's good to see you."

Petrovitch pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. "Yeah. And you."

"It's been a long time. You only work down the road. Maybe…"

"Or maybe not. You know why."

"Are you happy, Sam?" she asked. She was wearing lipstick. She never used to.

"I'd be happier if the city wasn't *pizdets*. We're losing her: six months, a year, two. I don't think it matters how long it takes. You can shovel *govno* by the barge-load, but it's…"

"Inevitable? I know." She stepped closer to him, and Petrovitch forced himself not to retreat. "You can always leave. Lots of people

have."

"You stayed."

"But you're not staying because of me, are you?"

"No," he said. "The world has become a complicated place, and I don't know where I stand anymore. You heard about yesterday?"

"Of course." She ran her finger through her fringe, and the hair fell back like it was made of rain. "Who's the blonde?"

He didn't know what she meant for a moment. "Oh. Her. McNeil. She's a—she's one of my students."

"Does she have a first name?"

"Yeah. It's," and he screwed his face up, "Fiona. That's it."

"And what has Madeleine to say about it?"

"She hasn't said anything. I've only just realized it doesn't look brilliant and I've seen it a dozen times." He shrugged. "I got caught up in the moment. I'm hugging Hugo just as hard."

"Be careful, Sam." Sonja looked up at him. "You might not recognize infatuation. But I do."

Petrovitch wore a pained expression. "Really?"

She nodded.

He scratched at his chin. It rasped. Then he remembered what he'd come for. "Harry Chain."

"Yes. Him. What does he want?" Her antipathy was clear from her tone.

"The CIA are in town, apparently, and not in an 'if you have a few moments, I'd like to ask you some questions' sort of way. Sorenson's sister is here as well, and Chain thinks the two are connected." He dug his hands in his coat pockets. "I suggested we just tell them everything rather than try and keep it all secret. Information wants to be free, and all that."

"But what about my father?" asked Sonja. "The… you know."

"That's precisely why I've decided to keep quiet for now." Petrovitch turned his face up to the sky. "It's not something we can keep up forever, though. We have to start thinking ahead. Where do we want to be in five years? Ten years? We're going from day to day with no clear vision of what we'll become, and it'll be the death of us. This is just survival, but we need more than that."

"Sam…"

"I've spent years hiding. All that left me with is more to hide." He let his head fall. "I'm tired, Sonja. I've got the world's press waiting for me, and all because I made something the size of a grapefruit fly. That wasn't even hard. What we did in the Long Night: now that was hard, and we can't tell anyone about it."

"You're right," she said. "If you want to escape, I have the money and the contacts: we could always run away together."

Even though she was smiling, he knew she meant it. It cut deeper than Miyamoto's sword ever could. His heart spun faster and his skin prickled with sweat. Then a thought, tentative and tantalizing, entered his mind.

"You know what?" said Petrovitch. "That's not such a bad idea."

She gasped and pressed one immaculately manicured hand to her crisp, white blouse.

"I thought they only did that in movies," and he continued without a break. "No, really. We could all run away. This needs some serious work."

She found her breath. "What are you talking about?"

"I'll tell you when I've got some answers. In the meantime, what are we going to do about Charlotte Sorenson?"

"And the CIA," added Sonja.

"I don't believe the *zadnitza.* But Sorenson's sister will come here, and she didn't look like the sort of woman who'd take *govno* from anyone."

"I'll deal with her." She'd recovered from her momentary shock. "No need for her to even know you exist."

"You don't know what Sorenson told her."

"So I'll deal with her," she repeated.

"Not that way." Petrovitch finally got her meaning and he shook his head. "If she wants to see me, don't block her. That'll just look suspicious. And when it comes down to it, I killed her brother for lots of very good reasons. If I have to tell her about that, I will."

"And I will protect my father, Sam. Even from you."

"Yeah. I know." He scratched the nape of his neck, touching the ring of cold metal that lay flush with his skin. "Look, I'd better be off. Find a back door to sneak in."

"You should be happy, Sam. You've proved your equations were right." She touched his arm, briefly, and Petrovitch stepped back from her, balancing on one heel and ready to turn. "Come up and see the park sometime."

"I don't know about that. I climbed all those stairs once: I'm not sure I want to do it again." He bit at his thumb. "I do use lifts, now. Sometimes. But not yours."

He spun away, raising his hand to the statue-still figure of Miyamoto. Petrovitch's coat swirled about him, and he headed off toward Hyde Park.

He was in a foul mood by the time he made it to the lab. He threw his coat down on an acid-etched bench and kicked out at a stool.

"Vsyo govno, krome mochee."

Then he realized he was alone for the first time in two hours, enveloped in a silence that made his ears ring. He sat down at a desk —it looked like Dominguez's—and flipped his glasses off.

Next to a picture frame that scrolled Spanish views was a half-empty mug of coffee. Which meant it was half-full, and he fell on it gratefully, swilling the lukewarm brew down in gulps. He hadn't done the eating thing either, and he idly rolled out the drawers, the same ones where he might keep his own stash of food in his own desk.

Nothing. And he wasn't going to brave the canteen after the ludicrous scrum that had developed in the foyer. The paycops had been worse than useless, holding up their own cameras rather than trying to keep order. Even then, when he'd agreed to answer some questions, sitting on the reception desk to gain some height over the crowd, no one had the wit to ask him anything to do with the experiment itself. There'd been no attempt to understand the physical principles behind the effect or interrogate him on the direction of future investigations.

That had made him as angry as the constant shouts of "How do you feel?"

It was novelty they were seeking, not enlightenment.

He'd dismissed them all with a growl, and pushed through to safety with practiced elbows. Even then, he'd escaped from the frying pan only to find the fire.

The university hierarchy, with patent lawyers in tow, tried to stitch him up in words so complex he could barely fight his way out again. In the end, he'd signed nothing: no verbal agreement to any course of action, no appending his thumbprint to any document that would take longer to read than the lifetime of the universe.

"You can't copyright physics," said a voice.

Petrovitch looked up, saw only a blur. He patted around for his glasses and fitted the arms over his ears.

McNeil: she'd made no effort to dress up for the press either. Same old jeans, same old sweatshirt, no makeup or jewelry.

"Sorry?"

"What you said: you can't copyright physics." She sat down on the edge of Dominguez's desk. "I agree."

"Yeah, well. No one cares what we think. Not anymore." He scratched at the corner of his eye. "Last night I dreamed that I was in a park—somewhere warm, not here—and the place was stiff with kids; little kids, babies, toddlers, teenagers, no one older than us, anyway. They all had spheres, and they were playing with them. Sliding them to each other, patting them so they bounced and spun, pushing them away and then running after them. Some of the bigger ones had made up a football-like game, with trees for goalposts, and

others had stuck them to trays or bits of wood and were surfing on them. They all looked like they were having a really great time: certainly no one was telling them they'd have to hand their spheres back because they broke copyright."

She reached across and picked up his—Dominguez's—mug. "Want a fresh one?"

"Yeah. Sure."

She busied herself at a sink, her back to him. "What are you going to do?"

"Now? I don't know."

Dominguez shouldered his way in. He saw McNeil and was about to say something, then he spotted Petrovitch and changed his mind.

Petrovitch wasn't inclined to move. He sat, drumming the desktop with a fingernail tattoo, while Dominguez put his bag down on a bench.

"We have moved the mass balance downstairs, as you requested," he said.

Petrovitch looked around. He finally noticed that the machine had gone.

"Yeah. So you have." He sat up and stilled his hands. "Look, sit down, both of you. I think I do know what I'm going to do next."

They pulled up chairs and waited expectantly. Petrovitch wondered what their reaction might be.

"We need a break from all this. We're not going to get any proper work done around here for a few days anyway, until the dust settles and things get back to normal. So: we're going to do something different. A *gedankenversuch."*

"A what?" asked Dominguez.

"Thought experiment," murmured McNeil, then to Petrovitch: "Into what?"

"Society. I want you to go and design me a human society. Not a utopia: one that acknowledges its faults and includes mechanisms to correct itself. One that's better than the one we have now. Info-rich. Post-scarcity. Knowledge as currency. Stuff like that." Petrovitch looked at their bemused faces. "Can you do it?"

Dominguez frowned his heavy brows. "I suppose so. Can I ask why? Is this part of our training?"

Petrovitch sat back, lacing his fingers together behind his head. "Yeah. It is. It's a mistake to be an expert in just one narrow field. You need to be able to read widely and apply your smarts to any problem. Let's see how you deal with this one."

"You said a few days." McNeil leaned forward. Her interest and enthusiasm had been piqued, and her usually pale cheeks were slightly flushed. "How long do we have?"

“What’s today?”

“Tuesday,” she said.

“Friday, then. On my desk by Friday.” He got up, pushing the chair back with a flick of his knees. “Don’t be late.”

6

He'd barely got back to his own office when his leg rang. He let it trill while he put the kettle on—he'd somehow missed out on McNeil's offer—then delved inside the pocket.

It wasn't her, but he did recognize the caller.

"*Yobany stos,* Chain. You're not even supposed to have this number."

"Very slick, Petrovitch. I particularly liked the stream of invective you launched at the bloke who asked 'Dude, where's my flying car?' And you wonder why the public look on science news as irrelevant?"

"No, I don't wonder at all. It's because every last one of you enjoys wallowing in pig-shit ignorance. Why did you call? I think I said everything I wanted to last night."

"There've been developments."

"Tell you what, Chain. I'm a physicist. You're a MEA intelligence officer. I won't ask you to reshape human destiny, and you can stop trying to get me to do your job for you."

"We've found a prowler."

Petrovitch tucked the phone in the angle between his shoulder and his ear. He poured his coffee dregs into the pot plant and hunted for the jar of freeze-dried granules. "I'm assuming that word means something special."

"A sort of robot. It was active, and armed."

"A Jihadi leftover?" He shook a tablespoon of coffee into his mug and stood over the kettle, waiting for it to boil.

"Don't think so. There are reasons to suspect otherwise."

"And you're going to tell me what those reasons are, or do I have to guess?"

"The Jihad made things out of what came to hand. This was meant."

Finally, steam started to rise from the spout. He flicked the off switch and poured the water out. "This is still not my problem, Chain."

"It's American."

"Yeah? It has the stars and stripes painted on the outside?"

"I think you're missing the point."

Petrovitch cleaned a spoon on his trousers. "Go on, then. Tell me the point." He took the mug back to his desk and stirred as he listened.

"Do you know how those things work? Short-range radio control. Doesn't have to be line of sight, but the operator isn't normally more

than a couple of kilometers away. It killed two of the team that stumbled across it before they managed to frag it with a grenade. The resulting explosion killed another of them. This was in the Outzone, on the southern fringe of Epping Forest."

"Okay."

"Is that all you're going to say?" said Chain.

"Pretty much. I'll concede that it looks like the Yanks are in the Metrozone, for whatever reason. Have you talked to them about it yet?"

"No."

"Why not?" Petrovitch turned sideways to the desk and stretched out. "This, all of this, is stupid. They know you know. They're waiting to see what you do. You can join in their game and be all sneaky, or you can play it straight. Someone—presumably an American agent—killed three MEA soldiers using this robot. The only guarantee you have is that they'll think they can do whatever the *huy* they like if you don't complain loud and long right now."

"If I do anything," said Chain, "they'll pull back and have another go with a different team in a month's time. I need to catch them red-handed."

"No, no you don't, you *balvan*! This is Oshicora all over again, except this time it's you versus the United States government." Petrovitch was on his feet, yelling down the phone. "I learned not to trust you last time. Me, Maddy, Pif, Sonja—if you won't keep us safe, I will. Tell the Yanks to back off, or I'll find a way to do it myself."

He ended the call, and for good measure, threw the phone across the room.

He scalded himself on his coffee, forgetting how hot it would be. Pressing his thumb hard against his lips, he felt the heat spread.

Then Petrovitch picked up the phone again and dialed Chain.

"If you wanted something, why didn't you ask?"

"Because I'm embarrassed," came the reply. "We employ forensic specialists, we pay them good money to work for MEA, and sometimes, just sometimes, it'd be really great if they actually turned up to do an honest day's labor. I have the parts we retrieved from the scene before we were chased off by the Outies. They're laid out in a warehouse, and I can't get any usable information from it because I don't know how."

There was a blister forming, and there was nothing Petrovich could do about it. Ice would be good, but he knew there was nothing below zero in the building other than cryogenic nitrogen.

"I ought to tell you to *poshol nahuj*."

"But not today."

"No. Not today. Where is this warehouse?"

"The old train shed at King's Cross."

"And how many people know about this?" Petrovitch picked up his coat and shrugged it on, one arm at a time. "Because if it's more than you and me, I'd bet my *babushka's* life the Yanks know it, too."

"Maybe half a dozen people. I have a chain of command I have to inform."

"So we'd better get down there before the evidence disappears. Meet me out front in five."

Petrovitch sat on the steps, waiting. A huge four-wheel-drive car —more a small lorry than anything a private citizen would think necessary—put two tires up on the curb and the darkened window hummed down.

"Hey. Good to see you still have the coat."

Petrovitch got to his feet and walked across the pavement. "Grigori? *Yobany stos!* What happened to the Zil?"

Grigori grinned apologetically. "Comrade Marchenkho managed to get a UN reconstruction contract. We all have these fancy autos now." He slapped his hand on the outside of the door, leaving his fingerprints in the dirt. "Armored. Very tough."

"How is the old goat?"

"Better for not having Oshicora around. His blood pressure is much lower these days. The Long Night worked out well for us."

Petrovitch pressed his fingertips against his chest. No pulse, just the throb of a turbine. The Ukrainian noticed the ring on his finger.

"That?" said Petrovitch. "I suppose it worked out well for me, too. In a narrowly-avoided-death-repeatedly way." He looked up and down the street. "Look, is this meeting a happy accident, or has Marchenkho sent you? Only I'm expecting Harry Chain any minute now and if he sees me talking to you, he'll go *kon govno* crazy."

Grigori beckoned him closer. "Marchenkho sends his congratulations, and an open invitation for a drink."

"Yeah. We can swear loudly and point guns at each other in a vodka-fueled frenzy: just like old times."

"Also a warning. There are people…"

"There often are."

He shook his head. "No. You must take this seriously. They have been asking questions about the Long Night. They know of the New Machine Jihad, and that the Oshicora Tower was involved. Beyond that?" Grigori shrugged. "We don't know what went on, only that it involved you."

"I'd heard someone was taking an interest."

"Who are they? Union investigators? They do not behave like the Union."

“No. Not the Union.” Petrovitch’s face twitched.

“Who, then?”

“The CIA. Tell Marchenkho to give Chain a call. And speak of the devil.” A battered gray car rattled up behind Grigori’s behemoth.

Grigori looked at his rear-view mirror. “What do you want us to do?”

Petrovitch pushed himself away from the open window. He could see Chain’s squashed face behind his steering wheel. “Keep an eye on my back, will you? I don’t trust this lot to do anything but stand round and stare at my rapidly cooling corpse.”

“Is done,” said Grigori. *“Dobre den, tovarisch.”*

The window buzzed upward, and the four-by-four bounced back into the street.

Chain leaned across his car and threw the passenger door open. Petrovitch sauntered over and clambered in.

“What,” said Chain, “did he want?”

“Marchenkho’s invited me around for cocktails one evening. Black tie affair, you wouldn’t be interested.”

“And really?”

“I can easily get back out and do something constructive. Or you can just drive.” Petrovitch tugged at the seat belt to strap himself in, but when Chain muttered something under his breath, he changed his mind and made to get out. “Fine. See you later.”

“Okay, okay.” Chain pulled onto the road without signaling, or even checking it was clear. “Do you have any idea how stressful this job is?”

“No. Neither do I care.” Petrovitch twisted around in his seat and looked out of the rear window. “I have troubles of my own.”

“You could always leave,” said Chain, echoing Sonja’s remark of earlier. “After yesterday, I imagine you could go pretty much anywhere. Take that wife of yours somewhere she’s not going to get shot at.”

“Funny you should say that,” said Petrovitch. There was no one following them. Not that that didn’t preclude the possibility that they were being watched every moment. He turned back and finished strapping himself in.

“Meaning?”

“Nothing for you to worry about. Now, about this prowler.”

“Five minutes ago, you’d never even heard the word.”

“Yeah. And now I’m a *yebani* expert.” He dipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out the rat. “Let’s see. Tracked vehicle, roughly pyramidal, sensor array on a central pylon, gyrojet weapons laterally positioned, each with a two-hundred-degree arc of fire, short-range scattergun. Powered by four rechargeable nanotube batteries, EMP

hardened electronics. Any of this sounding familiar?"

"Worryingly so."

"Then you've got the genuine article." He looked up from his screen. They were passing Hyde Park. Empty, now. The last remains of the shanty town were blowing in the wind: torn plastic, loose sheets of cardboard, tatters of cloth flapped against the boards surrounding the park. The bulldozers had moved in, had been moving in for a month now, and the work had stalled. Some Metrozone assemblyman wanted all the bodies that lay on and under the park exhumed and buried elsewhere. "Another thing."

"Which is?" asked Chain, when Petrovitch didn't continue.

He tore his gaze from the window. "Self-destruct mechanism. These things are mobile thermobaric bombs. My guess is the MEA grenade pre-ignited the fuel–air mix before it reached its critical concentration. That's why you've got bits left to look at. Another second or so, and you'd have lost everyone and everything, turned inside out by the shockwave and incinerated."

"Translated?"

"You got lucky."

"I'll remember to pass that along to the next of kin"; Chain grunted as he hauled the car around Marble Arch.

"What was it guarding?"

"I… don't understand."

Petrovitch snapped the rat shut. "Clearly. These things aren't tourists, Chain—it was keeping the Outies away from something, probably had done for a while, when the MEA patrol just happened to stumble across it and it all went *pizdets*. Take a look at the satellite images—near infrared if you can get them—or just swamp the area with soldiers until you find whatever it was."

The last time he'd been up the Edgware Road, he'd been on his way to rescue Sonja from the Paradise militia. Madeleine's church had been at the top end of the street, before it had been burned down and a Jihad demolition robot had stirred the rubble.

It was at the start of an arrow-straight line that cut a swathe all the way to the East End.

"Petrovitch?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm talking to you."

He tried to blink away the images that were burned onto his retina. "Looks like I'm not listening."

The domik pile on Regent's Park had been kicked over by the same robot, heading northwest. Four months on, the chaos of spilled containers was being taken apart by teams of thieves with gas axes, burning their way through the labyrinth one death-filled space at a

time.

"You lived there, didn't you?"

"No. I had a bolt-hole there. Different. One of the high-up domiks." Regent's Park slid by and out of sight. "I wonder if they've got to it yet?"

"Leave anything of interest inside?"

"No." He tried a smile, and found it didn't fit. "I was always careful."

"That's a matter for debate." Chain threaded his way through the drift of rubble either side of the Hampstead Road junction, then picked up speed again. He took the car down a side road and toward a tall chain-link fence.

He pressed his knees against the underside of the steering wheel and, using both hands, felt in his pockets for his card.

"Chyort." Petrovitch reached over and steered them, more or less, toward the gate. "You may as well not bother. There's no one to show it to."

Chain applied the brakes and the car jerked to a halt, front bumper almost touching the fence. He left the engine idling and got out.

Petrovitch joined him and, together, they peered through the mesh.

"Hey," Chain called. "Major Chain, MEA."

"Yeah. Your spidey senses not tingling yet?" Petrovitch buried his fists in the grid of metal and heaved. The gate swung open with a tinny rattle. Beyond was a short street of anonymous prefab factory units, dwarfed by the station concourse next door.

Chain fumbled for his gun. "I don't suppose you're carrying?"

"No. Not at the moment."

"Look in the boot."

Petrovitch backed away from the gate and popped the lid of the boot. When he closed it again, he was feeding cartridges into an automatic shotgun. "You called for help?" he asked.

"I've done that." Chain looked up at the buildings either side of the concrete road. "They may be some time."

"Well," said Petrovitch, sitting down on the warm bonnet, "I can wait."

"Aren't you coming?" Chain looked back at him.

"This is well beyond my pay-grade, Chain. When it's safe, you can call me."

Chain dithered for a moment, grinding his heel against the loose grit. He shrugged his shoulders and started to walk.

The explosion started small: a white flash of light behind a ground-floor window. The walls flicked off a coat of dust and started

to swell, like they were taking in a mighty breath. Then they failed in a roar of black smoke and orange fire. The roof was briefly in the sky, all in one piece, girders and corrugated iron sheets. It peeled apart and started to fall back to earth, one sharp spinning piece after another.

Petrovitch rolled back, turning. He was crouched on the top of the car. Things were flying toward him, rather quicker than he could run. He jumped, and the blast caught him while he was still in the air.

He was thrown down like a doll, and the ground was very hard indeed.

7

He could taste blood, and he was certain it was his. Dust and smoke swirled all around: his lungs were full of it, and the skin on his face was scrubbed wet by the rough road. His ears were ringing.

Petrovitch lay there and blinked, trying to make sense of what had just happened. His glasses were awry, and he dragged a hand out from beneath him to straighten them. There was blood on his palms, too.

He took a breath, coughed hard, and focused on the shotgun lying in front of him. He reached out and dragged it toward him, then used it to push himself upright.

The bombed building had fallen in on itself, extinguishing the fire beneath, but all around were shattered windows and flames twisting from them. A column of black ash rose thick into the air before being blown ragged in the wind. Behind the noise in his head was the clamor of alarms.

Chain's car was between him and what was left of the fence, its paintwork now scarred by more than age and the occasional knock. The open doors had lost all their glass, the front tires their air.

Petrovitch limped to where the gate lay flattened against the ground.

"Chain!"

No sign of him. Popping supports, snapping walls, cracking rafters, but no Chain.

He slung the gun over his shoulder and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Chain!"

He could feel the heat from where he stood. Steam was rising from beneath his feet. He whirled around, seeing for the first time a straggling crowd forming back at the roundabout.

"Chain!"

He saw him. He saw his feet, his legs as far as his knees, laid out on the bonnet of his own car. The rest of him had been forced through the concave windscreen.

Petrovitch walked slowly toward him, aware that Chain wasn't moving his worn shoes, not even an involuntary twitch.

"Chain?"

He knew he had to check. He knew he didn't want to. He gripped the top of the door, steeling himself, then ducked down.

For a moment, he couldn't work out what he was looking at. Chain's head appeared to be missing, and then he saw it, bent back under his still and shattered body, caught between the two front seats.

Petrovitch straighted up, breathing hard. Everything seemed to be spinning, the sky, the smoke, the street. People were running toward him, running away from him, shouting incomprehensible things at him. He didn't understand.

And someone caught his eye.

A figure, all in black, was walking away up the Pancras Road. Walking. Reaching a line of bystanders and pushing through them, leaving them to turn and gesture angrily.

"Hey." Petrovitch slid the shotgun off his shoulder and into his hands. "Hey. You."

He chambered the first shell and started after him. Within a few steps, he was jogging, and so was the man. At least it looked like a man: tall, athletic, dressed like an athlete even, an all-in-one body suit with nothing flapping. A courier would have had a courier bag. This man had nothing.

Petrovitch speeded up, gauging a loping gait that would close the distance between them. The man responded in kind, and it quickly turned into a chase.

They were both running as fast as they could. Petrovitch reached the line of people and they scattered before him, taking in the state of his face, the big gun held across his body, the aura of utter blind rage seeping from every pore of his filthy, smoke-scarred skin.

Suddenly, he had a clear shot. He snapped the stock to his shoulder and his finger spasmed on the trigger. The recoil nearly tore his arm off. He spun and fell, the fresh pain serving only to stoke the fire inside.

He got up with a growl and started over again. The man was further ahead now, moving in fast, clean strides. Then he just seemed to disappear.

Petrovitch raced to the place where he'd last seen him. A road to his left went under the railway station—a deep long tunnel made wide by the pillared supports for the structures above.

He took a chance and took the turn. The colonnades either side were home to the homeless. They stared at him as he ran by, but moments before they had all been looking down toward the small rectangle of daylight at the far end.

Framed in it, just for a second, was the man. He hesitated as he looked behind him, and Petrovitch fired again. This time he leaned in hard, and though the butt kicked back ferociously, he didn't screw up.

The road sparked just in front of his target, who clasped at his shin before running off again, going to the right, heading north.

Petrovitch kept going. Arms, legs pumping, coat streaming out behind him, heart spinning like it had never spun before. His breath came in rhythmic spurts, in, out, out, in, out, out. Trying to remember

everything Madeleine had taught him: stride length, balance, keeping his head up even if he felt like hunching over, even if he felt like sinking to his knees and burying his head in his hands.

And he was gaining. He'd wounded the man, forced razor-sharp chips of road surface at his leg: even if they hadn't penetrated, the impact of them slowed him down. Whereas Petrovitch's cuts, grazes, that stabbing sensation in his face that felt like an electric shock every time his feet hit the tarmac, spurred him on.

The further they got from the site of the explosion, the more people were on the streets. They were looking up at the black cone of ascending smoke, or sometimes not even that, just out, just happening to be on the route of a man head to toe in black, sprinting by with an uneven step, and a few seconds later of a slight man with white-blond hair and a face streaming with bright red blood. The shotgun was almost incidental.

Petrovitch saw the man glance behind again, caught a glimpse of a wide mirrored band over his eyes. Hatnav: he was using hatnav, and knew precisely where he was, and where he needed to go. The case for Petrovitch's own overlays was in his pocket, banging up and down against his thigh, but he couldn't afford the time to put them on.

The sirens that had been converging on the yard behind King's Cross shifted subtly. They were coming up behind him.

The man he was chasing knew that as well. He had hacked feeds from MEA control center. He barreled right into a vast office building, squat and dirty, windows jagged and doors shattered.

Petrovitch went in too, blue and red lights flickering at his back. The dim foyer, the hanging ceiling panels where lights and wire had been ripped down, the skeletons of partition walls. It was a stupid place to be, where ambush was easy and hiding easier.

He brought up the gun and tracked its sights across the expanse of destroyed fittings and bird crap.

He heard a noise above him. The barrel jerked up and he let rip with another round, blowing a hole in the remains of the suspended ceiling and putting a crater into the concrete slab above.

MEA militia were right outside. He didn't have long before they stopped him.

Up the stairs. The man was heading for the roof. Even as Petrovitch pounded the steps in the stairwell, he realized that it didn't make any sense. If it'd been him, he'd have stuck to the ground floor. The area was vast, the cover good. By going up, he'd be trapped. MEA would just have to wait for him to come out.

So there had to be another reason, another plan, unless the man was a *balvan.* Which he could be.

There was sound on the stairs. A door popping open, a flash of

daylight, then the door swinging back shut: he'd reached the top, and in a few seconds, so would Petrovitch.

He shouldered the door, and tumbled out onto the great plain of the roof. The black figure was really limping now, but still moving at a speed that put him halfway across the gray-green surface.

He could shoot and miss. He could force him up against the edge of the roof and make certain. He kept on going.

The man ahead jumped up onto the parapet and leaped. There was no hesitation, no momentary stall; a fluid up and over. Petrovitch's waist slammed into the barrier. He looked. A lower roof, and the man still running, still favoring his left leg.

It was at the limits of what Petrovitch thought he could hit, but he'd do it anyway. He took a deep breath, held it, and looked down the length of the gun. He had no heartbeat to bounce the sights, and he was, all of sudden, brutally calm.

Squeeze the trigger.

And the man jinked sideways. The roof where he'd been pocked and insulation fluffed out.

He had real-time satellite data. That cost money.

It was a long way down to that second roof. The man had done it, so Petrovitch was going to do it too. He landed in a heap, and he managed to hurt his wrist trying to roll with the blow. He got up, and restarted the same monotonous beat of one foot after another. He needed to keep his quarry on the move and not give him a moment's rest.

Ahead was a half-finished building, looking like it had been half-finished for a long time. It wore a shroud of tattered plastic around its open floors and suspended beams.

If Petrovitch got his prey inside, his spy-in-the-sky would be useless.

The man seemed to be obliging. He jumped over the railings and onto the scaffolding tied to the side of the construction site. He hung on one of the crossbars, then started to slide downward, going hand over hand, slowing his fall.

As Petrovitch reached the edge, the man stopped and ducked into the building's shell, three stories lower, across a three-meter gap.

Petrovitch slung the shotgun over his back, climbed up and over and braced himself. If he fell now, he'd die. More to the point, the man would get away. He bent his legs and pushed out.

He flew across the distance, arms outstretched. The first level flashed past his eyes. His momentum carried him onto the platform below, slamming him down on the wooden boards laid across the scaffolding.

The whole structure shook. Someone had been borrowing pieces

of it from the ground floor. But the building itself looked sound enough: no walls, no duct work, as empty as a car park. He picked himself up and shrugged the gun back into his cold grip.

He ghosted through the hall of pillars to where the stairwell was. No stairs, just a black pit all the way down. He'd come too far to give up: but that was just like him, always going too far when a saner mind would have called a halt.

He threw the gun down to the next slab of floor, then lowered himself off the edge until his fingers turned white and his feet dangled over the abyss. He swung his legs and let go.

He landed badly. Again. This time he jarred his back all the way from his coccyx to his shoulder blades. He looked around, saw nothing and repeated the process. Gun thrown. Body suspended and dropped. Spine-crushing impact.

Still nothing. The man had been on this level, and Petrovitch had arrived too late. He jumped to the next floor: the air was forced out of his lungs and he was left gasping.

A shadow came straight at him out of the gloom, with that injured skipping run. Petrovitch snatched up the gun, forcing himself to a sitting position.

The figure sprang clean over him before he could aim, and dropped into the stairwell. Petrovitch twisted awkwardly around, trying to keep his sights on him. The man's hands slapped down on the lip of the next floor down, and he used that slightest of touches to jack-knife his black-clad body to safety.

He looked up at Petrovitch, nose and mouth and chin a pale half-moon. Petrovitch looked down, past the knife that was sticking out of his chest, steel blade visible between nylon grip and the growing stain across the front of his T-shirt.

Maybe the man was waiting for Petrovitch to topple forward, down the stairwell, dead before he hit the bottom, dead for certain afterward. Or perhaps for the gun to slip from nerveless fingers and for him to sag backward, his life leaking away.

Petrovitch brought the shotgun up to his shoulder and fired his last shell. The solid slug tore a hole through the man's ribcage and punched out his spine. What remained folded into the center of the poppy-colored pattern blossoming on the concrete behind him.

The sound of the shot echoed away. Petrovitch was quite prepared to reverse the gun and beat out what life was left in his adversary. When it looked like that wasn't going to be necessary, he put the empty gun down beside him and curled his fingers around the knife handle.

He gave it a tug, and it felt like he was trying to pull his heart out, so he stopped. He could work it free by moving it from side to

side, but that would cut more flesh. The point of the blade had sliced through his muscle, between his ribs, and embedded itself in the kevlar patch that covered his implant.

He might even consider himself lucky, when he had the luxury of time.

The chase was over. The adrenaline that had powered his fury was draining away. He hurt now, all over, from the acid pain in his face to the dull, numbing ache of his legs. And more.

He got to his feet, staggering like a drunkard, stumbling from one pillar to the next, until he got to the scaffolding.

Most of the MEA militia were still back at the first office building. One or two had heard the last shot, and were tentatively suggesting to their superiors that they should investigate.

Petrovitch wrapped the crook of his elbow around one of the scaffolding poles and leaned out. It wasn't far, but it was far enough. He clutched his knees to one of the downtubes and shinned down, taking exaggerated care not to knock the knife handle.

The first MEA soldier raised his pistol at Petrovitch, the second pushed it back down and pointed.

Petrovitch peeled his glasses free and scrubbed at his eyes. "Yeah. The *mudak* brought a knife to a gunfight."

Overwhelmed by abrupt exhaustion, he slumped to his knees in front of them, and hung his head low over the ground. Tears as well as blood dripped into the dust.

They'd killed Harry Chain.

8

It was the other way round this time, with Petrovitch sitting in the waiting room, bandaged and drugged, dressed in disposable paper pajamas, waiting for a shadow to fall across the glass panel and the door to open.

He had no rosary beads to click the time away. Instead, he lay back in his seat, eyes closed, realizing that the world had changed so much, so quickly, and that he really wasn't in control of it anymore.

The door didn't so much open as implode. He knew who it was. He could smell her fear and outrage on the gust of air that preceded her.

"You idiot!" She balanced on the balls of her feet, deciding whether to kiss him or kick him through the wall. She did neither. She was carrying a fresh T-shirt and a new pair of trousers for him, and she threw the bundle at him at full force. "What were you thinking? You could have been killed!"

He hadn't been thinking, of course. Nothing but blind revenge, the desire to make someone pay.

"You're not to do that ever again, do you understand me? Never again. Leave it to someone else, leave it to someone who has a gram of common sense, someone who's paid to take the risks, someone who's actually trained to weigh up those risks and make some sort of rational decision, rather than you because you're not any of those things. What were you even doing there in the first place?"

There was a lull in the storm of emotion that was Madeleine.

He opened his eyes with difficulty. The right side of his face was numb—injectable painkillers for his cracked cheekbone—and the doctor had told him not to smile for at least a month. That was one instruction he was probably going to be able to follow without difficulty.

She was standing over him, hands on hips, looking righteously angry and utterly magnificent in her gray MEA fatigues. Her skin was even paler than usual, and she was trembling.

"I cannot protect you if you do stuff like this," she said. "I cannot save you if I am not there."

Petrovitch moved his clothes to one side and wiped some drool away from the corner of his mouth. "Chain called me."

"And you had to go." Her jaw set hard. "I am going to kill him. Where is he?"

"I don't know. I imagine they're still trying to cut the roof off his car so they can get his body out." He shrugged the best he could.

“Someone beat you to it.”

The fight fell from her like a cut curtain. She sat down next to him, making the chair look child-sized.

“What?”

“He called me. Said he had some bits and pieces from a U.S. military robot, but needed them looked over to make sure they were genuine. There was no one his end who’d turn out, so I said yes.” He chewed at his lip, tasted antiseptic, and grimaced. It hurt, in a good way.

“You could have—should have—said no. He had no business asking you.”

“When they come for us in the night, to try and take us away to wherever it is they take people like us to torture for what we know, we’ll discover it’s been our business all along. Except it’ll be too late to do anything about it. I need to know who they are, and what they’re planning, because if I do, I can send them home with their tails between their legs.”

She put her arm around him, her hand resting against the shoulder which had taken the brunt of the shotgun recoil. The paper clothes he was wearing rustled.

“I didn’t believe him,” he said. “I didn’t trust him. Maybe…”

“He was just using you, as usual. You didn’t even like him.”

“Yeah. I know. And now he’s gone, I can’t even tell him what a *pizdobol* he was.” Petrovitch leaned in against her, resting his head in the angle between her head and chest. “I knew something was wrong. There should have been a guard on the gate. He wanted to go on, I wanted to wait. So he did his thing, and I did mine. He was right in front of me, Maddy.”

“He could have waited, just like you.”

“I should have made him.”

“When did he ever listen to you? He always did what he wanted.” She pulled him close. “Stupid man.”

“Ow,” mumbled Petrovitch.

“Sorry,” she said. She didn’t let go.

They sat like that for a while, listening to the little sounds each other made. The door opened again, and there was a man in uniform: jacket; crisp, white shirt; tie knot snug against his throat; trousers that could hold a crease in a hurricane. He was carrying a sidearm at his waist and a clear plastic bag in his hand.

“Apologies for the intrusion. Sergeant Petrovitch, Doctor Petrovitch?”

They looked up.

“Captain Daniels. Intelligence Division. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Loss?” said Petrovitch, sitting up. “Yeah. That. So am I.”

Daniels held up the bag he was holding. “We need to keep this as evidence, but we can release it to you later, if you want.”

Madeleine took the bag and examined the knife inside. “Where did you get this?”

“The surgeon took it out of your husband’s chest, Sergeant.”

She scowled at Petrovitch, and handed the bagged knife back. “It’s a Ka-bar. American.”

“They make them in Taiwan,” said Petrovitch, putting his hand on the dressing over his heart. “Could have come from anywhere.”

“No, it couldn’t,” she said. “It could only have come from my fool of a husband, who in ten years’ time will have to have had everything important replaced with plastic and metal.”

She stood up, forcing the captain back, and resumed her hands-on-hips accusation of Petrovitch.

“Anything else you need to tell me? Lost an eye, a leg? Been fitted with a robotic spleen? Because they’ve already replaced your brain with a fifty-cent pocket calculator.”

“Depends,” said Petrovitch.

“On what?”

“On how much they told you.” He looked over the top of his glasses. “Do we have to do this now?”

“Then when? I don’t see you doing anything else important right now—unless you’ve arranged another press conference to hurl abuse at.”

“Perhaps I should come back later,” ventured Daniels.

“No, we’re done here. You’re supposed to tell me everything, Sam. Everything.”

She stormed out, leaving Petrovitch with his head in his hands.

“That went well,” he said. “What can I do for you, Captain?”

“I need to ask you some questions. Are you sure this is a good time?”

“Yeah. She’s right: I’m not doing anything else, so questions are fine. I’ll do what I can. Can I just ask you one first?”

Daniels pointed to the seat vacated by Madeleine, and Petrovitch nodded his assent. The captain sat down smartly, back ramrod straight.

“How much trouble am I in? If the guy I killed was just a regular citizen who liked dressing up as a ninja, I’m screwed.”

“If that was the case,” said Daniels, “you’d be under arrest by now.”

“I’m supposed to be smart. Everyone tells me so. I could’ve thrown it all away.” Petrovitch scrubbed at his scalp with his fingernails. “I think I have some apologies to make.”

Daniels’ face twitched. “He doesn’t appear on the Metrozone

database. Most likely an Outie, judging from his appearance."

"Good job I didn't shoot him in the head, then."

"Quite. You were suspicious?"

"I'm a street kid. I know how people behave when they're scared, surprised, shocked. This man was too calm, like he knew what had happened, like he'd made it happen. It was just wrong."

"You chased him."

"And he ran. I looked like *govno* and I was carrying a *pushka.* I would've run from me, too, though I like to think I would have got away." Petrovitch shifted in his chair. The pain was starting to seep through the haze of morphine.

"You didn't think that someone who leaped from tall buildings was someone you should stay away from?"

"Yeah. Well. It was a little late for that. I was committed."

Daniels kept his hands on his knees. He didn't record any of Petrovitch's answers, merely soaked them up like a sponge.

"You were with Major Chain at his request, yes?"

"Yeah. He called me. Said there were no tech guys around."

"Is it something he did often?"

"No. No, he didn't."

"So why this time?"

Petrovitch shrugged. "Desperation. He was in a hurry. Couldn't wait. That's why he died in the explosion and I didn't."

"So how did you and the major know each other?"

It was time to start lying. He could do it, as natural as breathing, even to the urbane Captain Daniels.

"I was a witness, one of his old cases from back when he was plain old Detective Inspector Chain. Nothing ever came of it, but we'd talk every couple of weeks." Petrovitch pushed his glasses toward the bridge of his nose. "He was checking up on me, I suppose."

"You obviously made a big impression on him," said Daniels.

Petrovitch gave a momentary frown. "Why d'you say that?"

"He made you his next of kin." Daniels lost his composure for the first time, and sounded genuinely surprised. "Didn't you know?"

"No. No, I didn't. Why didn't the old *kozel* say anything?" Petrovitch inspected his bandaged palms. "What does that mean, next of kin?"

"It means he nominated you to receive any outstanding pay, in-service benefits. That sort of thing. Human Resources will tell you more." Daniels reclaimed his self-control. "There should be enough to pay for a funeral, at least."

"Hah," said Petrovitch mirthlessly. "So that's what he was after: mourners. You see, Captain, there's no one else. No one to mark the passing of Harry Chain but me. No friends, no family. That's what a

lifetime of pissing people off leads to."

He levered himself to his feet, the sudden surge of blood to his extremities making everything tingle. His face was frozen, his shoulder one big bruise, his hands and knees scrubbed raw and clean with only a layer of vat skin beneath the bandages. There was a hole in his chest that went all the way down to a notch on the surface of his heart, and that meant yet another scar on the road-map that was his ribcage.

He paced the floor, working the life back into himself.

"Do you know what it was he wanted you to look at?" asked Daniels.

"Don't you lot talk to each other?"

"Of course. I wanted to know if the major had told you."

"Yeah, he told me."

"Did you believe him?"

Petrovitch was flushing out the drugs from his system, feeling sharper by the minute. "No, of course not. I was going along to prove to him all he had were a couple of windscreen wiper motors and a bent aerial. Then some *govnosos* Outie takes out half the district and Chain goes to his grave thinking he was right."

"So you don't buy the CIA story?"

"No," said Petrovitch. "Do you?"

"I couldn't possibly say. Classified." Daniels was nowhere near as good at lying as Petrovitch. "You also need to remember that Major Chain was in breach of protocol when he talked to you."

"Yeah. Not a word."

"Thank you for your time, Doctor Petrovitch." Daniels adjusted his cuffs and stood, remembering to pick up the bagged knife as he did so. "I expect I'll see you again when you come to collect Major Chain's personal effects. Or we can courier them to you, whichever you prefer."

Petrovitch affected a moment's thought. "I'll come and get them. The least I can do, I guess."

Daniels extended his hand, and Petrovitch shook it gingerly. "Get well soon, Doctor."

"Thanks for not arresting me."

"These are difficult times for us all. If only everyone was as civic-minded as you."

Petrovitch suppressed his snort of derision until he was alone. Daniels didn't fool him, and he wondered if he fooled anyone. The uniform might work on some people, but not him: he'd had nothing but trouble from men—always men—strutting around as if they were on parade.

The man he'd killed wasn't an Outie. No chance whatsoever, even

discounting the satellite gear and the stealth suit, or the coincidence that the one building he'd bombed was the one where Chain had stashed the prowler components. It had been his teeth. They'd been even, white, perfect, glowing while bared in a feral snarl in the semi-darkness. No Outie, and precious few Metrozone dwellers, had teeth that good.

He'd bet good money that Daniels was running a gene assay right now, checking for military-grade bio-hacks, and that he thought the CIA were odds-on favorites for killing Harry Chain.

Petrovitch got his clothes on, and rescued his boots and coat. His rat was still in his pocket, along with the other bits and pieces he kept there. Not like last time. His fingers wouldn't lace his boots, and he ended up tucking the loose ends inside.

Madeleine was sitting in the reception area, counting her beads while having one eye on the television screen. She stopped clicking and tucked them away as he slopped closer.

"I would pull you up," he said, "except I'm more likely to rip both my arms out of their sockets."

She chewed at her lip. "I don't want to lose you, just when I've found you."

"Yeah. It was crazy. I should never have done it. That I got away with it doesn't excuse anything. Sorry."

"And it won't happen again?" She fixed him with a needle-like stare.

He blew out his breath in a thin stream. "Slight problem with that." He looked around: there were other people present, and what he wanted to say wasn't for public consumption. He did notice that he'd fallen further down the news cycle: the morning's bombing had knocked him lower. "Can we go and find something to eat? I need to tell you everything."

9

Petrovitch was shown into an office—which was in a different building to when Chain was a policeman, with a different view from the windows—and still recognized the hallmarks of the man.

There was a coffee maker in one corner, surrounded by the paraphernalia of making: dirty mugs, dirty spoons, two empty foil packets of filter coffee and one closed with a red clip. Filters were scattered like autumn leaves on the floor, spilling from the box on the shelf above.

Flimsy pieces of paper sat in randomly allocated piles on every flat surface, daring the erstwhile occupant to open the window and lose all order. Filing cabinets bulged with files. His desk was crammed, too, along with what brief ephemera he considered important.

There wasn't much room between the furniture and the walls: being a major in a bankrupt militia held even less prestige than a detective inspector.

"Yeah. Okay," said Petrovitch, "what am I supposed to do?"

Daniels presented him with a build-it-yourself document box. "Take what effects he left. The next person in will throw away what you leave, so better get them all."

Petrovitch folded the box together, pushing tab A into slot B until it became rigid. There was a lid, too, and that was constructed in the same fashion before being laid to one side. Daniels leaned against the door frame as Petrovitch edged his way toward the window and Chain's chair.

"I should watch you while you do this, but I can trust you, right?"

"Of course," said Petrovitch. "I'd appreciate some time alone."

"I'll come back in twenty minutes or so, see how you're doing." With one last look, he strode away, almost marching, leaving the door to the corridor open.

Petrovitch looked over the top of his glasses, and picked up a photograph frame, toying with it until Daniels' heels disappeared.

He was about to put the photo down when he realized what it was, what it showed. Him and Madeleine: him uncomfortable in a jacket, no tie. Her—she'd wanted white, but post-Long-Night Metrozone didn't do wedding dresses for two-meter-tall brides in a hurry. She wore gray silk instead, looking like gossamer, wound around her straight from the bolt and held together by artfully placed pins and a silver brooch.

Chain had taken the picture himself on the steps of the church,

then he'd taken the time and trouble to print it out and mount it, and sent the happy couple a copy. It appeared he'd made one for himself, too.

Petrovitch put it in the box. The corridor was clear, but that didn't mean he wasn't being watched. He took out a slim black wand and twisted it on. A line of lights rose up the side of the casing, then dropped back down until just one was illuminated.

He ran the wand over the desk, then spread out, holding it up and around until he'd scanned the whole room. Near the door, the lights tripped all the way into the red, and he peered out. There was a camera positioned just above, on the ceiling, a small black dome of surveillance.

He stepped back in and knocked the door half-closed with his foot.

He went straight to the desk and leafed through each file, scanning its contents with a quick, practiced eye. Nothing seemed immediately relevant in the first few, and he guessed they'd been placed there by a subordinate. Further down the pile was the report on the discovery of the prowler. That went into the box, too, as did the one beneath, which was slim, containing only a couple of sheets of typescript, but was labeled CIA suspects.

He looked at the size of the files, then retrieved two more, roughly the same thickness, from random places in the drawers. While he was there, he poked around in the far recesses of the cabinets, seeing what lay hidden.

He didn't know what to expect. Bottles, perhaps, but he'd never seen Chain so much as sniff at a wine cork. Porn, but the man seemed almost completely disinterested in women. Or men. And he clearly liked his pies, but his roundness was due to poor diet and lack of exercise, rather than bingeing on packets of biscuits.

Nothing but a few empty boxes of nicotine slap-patches. Chain had missed his vocation. He should have become a monk, instead. He might still be alive if he had.

Back to the desk then, and the tier of three drawers. Petrovitch pushed the empty biros and dried-out fibre-tip pens aside to get at the three cash cards at the bottom. He'd pass them through a reader later and find how much was banked on each.

The next drawer down was stuffed with storage media, all the way from ancient three-and-a-half-inch black squares, through silvered discs and plastic sticks, to the modern solid-state cards overprinted with a variety of designs.

They all went into the box. Even if they all ended up in a bulk eraser, it was worth sifting through them for the chance of one nugget of gold.

He opened the bottom drawer and found Chain's bugging equipment, devices he'd been the wrong end of on several occasions. There were manuals, software, and the bugs themselves, various sizes and shapes, including the sticky ones Chain liked so much. His detector wand, too.

Petrovitch didn't know if MEA would allow him to take that sort of property home. It was worth a try.

Now for the hard part. He opened the case that held his overlays and slipped them on his glasses, then from another pocket, clicked open the rat. The environment wasn't info-rich. Not yet, anyway.

He started patting the underside of the desktop, then the drawers, then got down on his hands and knees when he couldn't feel any pieces of paper. His face twitched. Chain hadn't pasted his logon details anywhere obvious.

There was nothing on the desk either: used mugs held only dregs, and the hardwired phone only its own number.

Then he cursed himself, and dived back into the half-full box, sliding out his wedding photo and using his thumbnail to open the back of it. Not there, either.

No matter. The job went from hard to really, very hard, but he was prepared. Using the rat, he navigated his way to the MEA computer—not the public face of the authority, but the bare code that covered the access nodes, and simultaneously fired up his secret weapon.

The script on his screen read: *moshi moshi.*

It was smart enough to know what he wanted. Of course it was. All he had to do was point at the node he wanted hacked, and it ground out the solution with blind repetition. Finesse wasn't required, but speed was. Two seconds and he was in.

His overlays came alive, a flurry of identity tags blossoming out from the cabinets, unique strings of numbers that were attached to every paper file. The two he'd salted away in the box gave up their names, and rather than delete the records completely, he swapped the tags with the two replacements. It was those he wiped out, and sent his agent through the MEA computer, scrambling any mention of the new numbers.

It wasn't perfect, but it'd take six months of solid work to find out what had really happened. That was it: retreat back out through the hacked node, making the user session disappear from the memory before closing the door behind him.

All he had to do now was get the physical files out of the building. The radio tags built into the cardboard covers were easy enough to dispose of. He just had to tear them off and soak the squares in a cold cup of black coffee to soften them enough that he

could peel them apart and disassemble the tiny printed circuit. As for the rice-grain-sized tags themselves—he placed them on the window sill and crushed them to dust with a glass paperweight.

Chain had a pair of scissors. Petrovitch turned one of his coat pockets inside out and sliced through the seam at the bottom, then pushed the pocket back through. Each file was rolled into a tube and slid inside, then artfully arranged to lie flat within the coat's lining, against the hem.

He took his overlays off and tucked them into their case, shut the rat, and put both into his other pocket. He put the lid on the box, and sealed it with tape from Chain's stash of stationery. The solitary and sad pot plant—some sort of yucca forced into dwarfism by the size of the container—went on top, shedding brown leaves.

He'd done what he came to do, and the time he had left was extra. So he put on one last pot of coffee, and cleaned out two mugs the best he could. There was no milk, no sugar, just hot, strong, oil-black brew. The maker coughed and spat until it had done, then Petrovitch poured himself a cup and sat back in Chain's chair with his feet up on the desk.

He closed his eyes and dreamed: there was the sea, white waves rolling up a narrow beach of dirty yellow sand, the strandline marked with tails of brown seaweed and bleached fragments of wood. There was green grass and pink flowers dancing in the wind, and inland, deep green trees grew. Between sea and forest was a dome of clear crystal that reflected the clouds in the baby blue sky. Inside the dome were structures, buildings within a building, and overhead, a wingless aircraft wheeled and spun with the gulls.

He was there. He was old.

"Doctor Petrovitch?"

He sat up with a sudden intake of breath. The coffee he was holding slopped over the rim of the mug and onto his legs.

"Yobany stos!" he yelled, and just about managed to get the mug down before he danced around the room, batting at his thighs. His actions set off all the aches and pains from the previous day. He screwed up his face in pain, and hobbled back to Chain's seat.

"Sorry," said Daniels. He was trying not to grin. "Have you taken everything you wanted?"

Petrovitch took a moment before replying. "Yeah. I made coffee."

"I can see that."

"Want one? At least it's hot."

"I can see that, too. Go on, then."

Daniels perched himself on the edge of the desk while Petrovitch poured a dark steaming stream into another chipped mug.

"He didn't have much," said Petrovitch. "Nothing to remember

him by. No photographs of him, his family, anywhere he'd been, nothing he'd made, nothing of sentimental value. A few bits and pieces, and that's that."

"Except for your wedding picture." Daniels took his coffee from Petrovitch. "Perhaps you'll find something different at his flat."

"His… flat." Petrovitch sat down again, and sipped at what was left of his drink, after he'd poured it over himself. The thought that Chain might have lived somewhere—that he left the office at all—was strange and unsettling. "I didn't find any keys."

Daniels dipped into his pocket and produced an evidence bag. Inside were two keys joined by a simple steel ring. As he slid them across the desktop, he asked: "Do you need the address?"

"Yeah." He took the proffered slip of paper and stared at the bag. There was a brass lever key, old school and secure, and a plain bar of metal for a magnetic lock. He dragged them into his hand, closing his fist around them so that the sharp edges dug into his freshly skinned palm.

"Doctor Petrovitch, can I ask you something entirely unrelated?"

"Sure."

"This research of yours: where will it take us?"

Petrovitch put the keys in his lap, and picked up his coffee again. "You realize you're the first person to ask me that?"

"Didn't you have a press conference yesterday?"

"Depressing, isn't it? No one wants to know anymore. I could have invented something that could unravel the fabric of space-time itself, and some *mudak* would call it boring."

Daniels looked over the top of his mug. "And have you?"

Petrovitch pushed his glasses up his nose. "Difficult to say. I'm… look: the Ekanobi-Petrovitch equations try to describe how the universe works. That I've shown we can change the local gravity field for one object is a signpost on the way, but all we have is a single answer to a very complex function that should have—will have—multiple solutions."

"But you're working on the others."

"I would be, but I've done no work since Monday morning. I'll get back to it when everything isn't so *pizdets*. I haven't answered your question, though. When you work with this… thing—Pif describes it as being like a sculpture—you get a sense of what might be there when you chip away all the rock you don't need. I'm pretty certain I can get a working spaceship drive out of it, not just enough to take us to the other planets, but to other stars. And then there's energy, fantastic amounts of it, trapped inside every atom. We can only get at it by going nuclear, and that's not exactly flavor of the century after Armageddon." He looked up and shrugged. "Give me ten years and no

one trying to kill me, and I'll do it."

Daniels said nothing. He blinked, drank his coffee, and tried to digest the new knowledge along with his beverage.

Petrovitch put his mug down and hefted the cardboard box. The pot plant on top wobbled, and threw another long, crisp leaf to the floor. "I've wasted enough of your time. You'd better show me out."

They traveled down in the lift together—Petrovitch reluctantly—all the way to the foyer, where they parted amidst all the comings and goings of smartly dressed politicians and administrators, and the smarter gray-clad MEA officers.

Petrovitch wondered how Chain had felt, coming in here every morning, staring up at the retina scanner. Had he wondered how he'd got to where he was, or had he just accepted it as his lot in life?

Madeleine was right. He hadn't liked Chain. But he knew so few people that the loss of even one bit hard.

"How are you getting home?" asked Daniels. "I can arrange for someone."

"It's fine," said Petrovitch. "I'm being picked up."

"Good luck," said Daniels, "with everything."

"Yeah." The Metrozone was falling apart, MEA or no MEA. Luck was about all they had left. "And you."

He stepped out of the revolving doors, past the guards, and out onto the street. A big car pulled up by the curbside, and, without breaking step, Petrovitch opened the back door and shoved the box along the seat. The yucca wobbled and tottered. As he got in he steadied it, then turned to close the door behind him. They were already moving.

"Did you get it?" asked Grigori.

"I got what he had. It might not be enough, but it's something."

10

Since Oshicora's star had burned itself out in a single night, Marchenkho's had quietly risen again. No more domik life for the Ukrainian: he had bright, warm offices, and Soviet-styled secretaries in severe suits and seamed stockings.

One held the door open for Petrovitch as he stepped through. Her scent was distracting, enough for him to miss thin-faced Valentina sitting quietly in the corner of the room.

Marchenkho turned from the window, his red star lapel pin glinting in the low winter sun.

"Ah, my boy. Is good to see you."

"Yeah. I'm surprised to find the feeling's mutual." Petrovitch held out the pot plant he was carrying. "Present from Harry Chain."

"Is looking a little worse for wear. Not unlike you. You are, as they say, foxed?" He took the plant in his fat fingers and ruminated on its previous owner. "Bad business, bad business all around."

Grigori stumbled in behind Petrovitch, carrying the cardboard box, and placed it on Marchenkho's dark wooden desk: some things, at least, didn't change.

"Thank you, Olga," he said to the waiting secretary. "Make certain we are not disturbed."

She strutted away on her high heels, and the door swished shut behind her.

"Olga?" said Petrovitch.

"Is not her name, but is good Soviet name. They are all Olga, *da?*" He chuckled, but Petrovitch didn't feel the need to join in. "You know Tina?"

"Yeah. Last seen blowing stuff up."

"She is smart. She will help us look at what we have."

Valentina's smile was brief and ironic. "Comrade Marchenkho tells me you have bad case of Americans."

Petrovitch tore at the tape securing the lid of the box. "They killed Chain. They nearly killed me. I'd like to get a few steps ahead of them before they come for me again."

"And this is likely?" she asked.

"Yeah. It is." He picked up the prowler file and presented it to her. "Unless they're congenitally stupid, that is."

"Is always possibility," said Marchenkho. "Reconstruction has made them a little bit, you know." He tapped his temple.

"What they might lack in intelligence, they make up for with sheer quantities of high explosive." Petrovitch retrieved the other file

and opened it up, taking time to read the information inside. A list of codenames, a copy of a memo to the director of the CIA from someone whose name was a string of "x"s, a single sheet giving the mission parameters for what they'd called, in their ludicrously overblown way, Operation Dark Sky.

"So, what is it the *Amerikanskij* want?" Marchenkho rumbled.

Petrovitch looked up from the paper with "ultra top secret" overprinted in red. "In order: work out what the *chyort* happened during the Long Night, decide whether it represents a threat to the U.S.A., then neutralize it. With extreme prejudice."

"Hmm." Marchenkho stroked his mustache. "We have not had the appropriate conversation yet."

"No," said Petrovitch emphatically.

"You are asking me to commit personnel, materials, to help you: I think you need to tell me why."

"I…" He looked around for a chair. Aside from the one Valentina occupied, and the one behind the desk, there were none. "They'll kill you if you know."

"A risk for me, surely?" Marchenkho was standing uncomfortably close, his breath sharp and mint-fresh. "Come, Petrovitch. As a favor to an old friend: who was the New Machine Jihad?"

"If that's the price of your help, it's too much." He snapped the file shut and watched while Marchenkho's eyes clouded over. "You're going to have to trust me."

"Trust works both ways, boy." Marchenkho looked over Petrovitch's shoulder at Grigori, who went to stand against the office double doors.

"And they really will kill you."

"Did Chain know?"

"Yes. You might think it a coincidence that he died in the explosion that took care of the prowler debris. I don't. You might have a low regard for the Americans. I don't. You might even believe that I'm using you to get myself out of trouble and that your death would mean nothing to me."

"It wouldn't?" He seemed amused by the idea.

"Let's just say I've had to readjust my priorities in the last couple of days."

Marchenkho snorted and headed back toward his desk. "You will tell me, Petrovitch. Eventually."

"It's a deal."

"*Da, da.* Talk is cheap. Grigori? Get coffee for us. Tina? What is your opinion?"

Valentina, quiet through the macho posturing, spoke up: "Is certain an American-made prowler was disabled by MEA forces in

Epping Forest. While it is not clear precisely who was operating the machine, Americans are jealous of their technology. They do not give it away, and it does not tend to fall into wrong hands. Their prowler would have easily killed any Outies who encountered it—who would have learned to stay away, perhaps."

Marchenkho sat in his chair and leaned back. Stalin looked down at his crown of thinning hair.

"What would the Americans gain by being in the Outzone?" The question was directed at Petrovitch.

"I don't know."

"Think of reasons," said Marchenkho softly. "Use that big brain of yours."

"Okay." Petrovitch looked up at the ceiling for inspiration. "They had a supply dump that wasn't in the Outzone originally, and the front line overtook them. Or they're using the fact that the Outzone is out of MEA's reach and they can do pretty much what they want there. Of course, when the Outzone overtakes us all, they can be as quick and dirty as they like and no one will know."

"Then we must move quickly," said Valentina. "Identify their agents and neutralize them. You have made good start."

"And if I'd been thinking more clearly, I'd have aimed at his arm or leg. Alive, he was worth his weight in gold. As it is, they can't even use his organs."

"He would not have let himself be taken. You," and she looked at Petrovitch with approval, "you did well."

"Yeah. If you say so."

"We all say so," said Marchenkho. "But there is something wrong here, yes? Pretend you are Union man, *da?* You are big in Security. You have CIA all over you like a rash. What do you do? What I would do is purge. Get rid of the enemy like I was flushing the toilet. Make a big noise. Show trials. Public executions. What do we have?" He leaned over his desk and whispered. "We have nothing."

Petrovitch patted his pockets. Chain's front door keys. He held them up and watched the light play off the dull metal.

"That's it. He was never a Union man. He ate information, but he didn't share it with anyone. Just kept it to himself, building a web and sitting in the middle of it." He moved his focus to take in Grigori, just returned from outside. "I know what he did in his spare time."

"Then what are you waiting for?" Marchenkho roared. "Go. Go! They are still one step ahead."

Petrovitch threw the keys in the air ahead of him, then snatched them back as he caught them up. Valentina was already by the doors, briefcase in hand. Grigori let them out, and led them through the outer office. One of the Olgas was approaching with a tray of coffee in

little china cups, and the three of them had to dodge around her.

Grigori beckoned them on toward the lifts.

"Do we have to?" asked Petrovitch.

"You want to take the stairs?"

"Yeah. If that's okay."

Grigori punched through into the cold, still air of the stairwell, with Valentina behind Petrovitch.

"What is it?" she said.

He looked around as the door closed with a clack.

"You want to talk without being overheard?"

"No. I just don't like lifts."

"The Oshicora Tower?"

"Yeah." Their footsteps were hollow against the naked concrete. "Some nights, I wake up screaming."

"But while we're here," said Grigori, "don't hold out on Marchenkho. You know what he's like. You can go from brave to stupid in an eyeblink."

"Thanks." Petrovitch snorted. He squeaked his rubber soles on the landing as he turned. "I know what I'm doing. For now."

"You'll tell him soon enough. Either because you want to, or because you have to. Understand?"

"I get it. Really. But." He stopped. Valentina almost ran into the back of him, and Grigori had gone a half flight before he realized. He walked slowly back up, hand trailing on the banister.

"You wish to say something?"

Petrovitch opened his mouth to speak, and Grigori held up his hand.

"Remember that Marchenkho is still my employer. My boss. I owe him my loyalty."

"Yeah. I wanted to ask if either of you has read any Tolkien?"

"What?" said Grigori, but Valentina nodded.

Petrovitch focused on her. "I have the One Ring," he said.

She stared at him, eyes wide.

"Do you trust Marchenkho enough to let him have it?"

"No," escaped her lips.

"If it ever looks like I'm going to have to tell him, kill me." Petrovitch looked over the top of his glasses at Grigori. "That goes for you, too."

The man was covered in confusion. "You have something powerful? A weapon?"

"Powerful, yes. A weapon? Only if you want it to be. And you know that Marchenkho will use it." He glanced at his watch. "Look, we'd better get moving."

Grigori didn't move. "This weapon: this is what the Americans are

looking for?"

"It's not a… Yeah, though they'll never find it."

He grabbed Petrovitch's arm. "Did it cause the Long Night?"

Petrovitch turned his face away. "Don't make me say any more. You'll become just another person they have to kill."

Grigori snatched his hand back. "I'm not happy with this. Can't you just get rid of it?" He dug his hands into his pockets, and Petrovitch could tell he was fingering his gun.

So he took the lead. He stepped past the man and headed downward. When he was certain they were following him, he called back up: "I could destroy it. But I'm not going to."

Grigori and Valentina hurried to catch him up, eventually flanking him as they reached the ground floor.

"Why not?"

"Because no one will believe that I have." Petrovitch shouldered the door aside. "I could do it now, and you wouldn't believe me. So why would the Americans?"

The foyer was gray and white, all curves and light. There were receptionists and guards, and a courier passing a packet through a portable scanner.

"Do they know you have it?" asked Valentina as they strode through.

"No. I expect they'll work it out, though."

"Then they will kill you," she concluded.

"They'll try."

The street-side doors hissed aside. Grigori's car was parked two wheels up on the pavement, and he opened the rear door.

Grigori got into the driver's seat, using his fingerprint to turn the engine over. Valentina swung her briefcase into the footwell. She and Petrovitch were nose to nose over the top of the door.

"You do not appear as worried as you should be," she said. "You have plan?"

"Not yet. I know what the plan should look like. I know what I need it to do." His hands gripped the painted metal, cool and heavy against his hands. "I know how much time I need to pull it off."

"Do you think," she said, then stopped to look around her: a couple of pedestrians, another car, ancient and dented, rolling slowly by. "Do you think it will work?"

The corner of Petrovitch's mouth twitched. "Yeah. It'll work."

She had blue eyes like he did, and cheekbones like axe-blades, but at that moment she looked supremely vulnerable. "If I can help, then I will. In any way. *Vrubatsa?*"

"Hey," called Grigori, "get in, you two."

"Okay," said Petrovitch.

Valentina got in, and Petrovitch jogged around to the passenger seat. Grigori was frowning at him.

"What?"

The driver shook his head. "Doesn't matter. Where are we going?" He fired up the satnav module, finger poised over the screen.

Petrovitch dug in his pocket for the paper Daniels had given him. He unfolded it for the first time.

"Finsbury Park. Seven Sisters Road."

11

Chain lived—had lived, past tense—in an apartment in a town house facing the main road. They gained access to the communal stairwell by one of the keys on the keyring, and swarmed up the stairs to the first floor.

In the shifting, shadow-battle against the Outies, Finsbury Park was behind the front line, but not so far as to be safe. The occasional pop of gunfire from further north was an aural reminder of that. Most of the residents had already fled, heading deeper Inzone or fleeing the city altogether. Only a couple of shops were open out of all the row of shuttered and bolted frontages. Where they got their customers from was a mystery.

Petrovitch didn't like it. "Let's not spend any longer here than we have to," he said, inspecting the blank faces of the two doors that led off the landing.

"Nervous?" asked Grigori. He was holding his automatic in plain sight, not that there was anyone else to see it.

"I seem to spend my life like that."

"It's not like your heart is going to pack up any time soon. Not anymore."

"No. It'll keep on pumping blood out of whichever arterial bleed I die of, long after I'm actually dead." He held up the magnetic key toward the pad on the door frame, only to have his arm held in place by Valentina.

"No," she said.

"No?"

"No." She laid her metal briefcase on the floor and clicked it open. The catches sprang and she lifted the lid. When she reached inside, she ignored the explosives, the wires and the detonators in favor of a stiff black cable.

"Tina," said Grigori, "Petrovitch is right: we don't have time for this."

"What? You want to open door?" She looked up over the top of the case. "Petrovitch, give him key."

Grigori took the key from Petrovitch's hand, and made two abortive attempts to bring the rectangle of metal toward the sensor. Each time he drew it back.

"What do you know that I don't?"

"Plenty," said Valentina. She carried on assembling the fiber-optic wand, attaching a small screen onto the back of the cable, and now she turned it on. The picture was of the foam packing inside her case,

magnified so that each individual gray bubble showed. “But I would ask you to think for moment. Chain is dead, and perhaps only by accident.”

“What if they wanted to make sure?” said Petrovitch. He pressed his palm against the wall separating him from the inside of Harry Chain’s apartment. It didn’t seem anywhere near bombproof enough. He regained the key and put it in his pocket.

Valentina slid the end of the fiberoptic cable through the crack under the door. The screen went black, and stayed that way before she changed the settings and dialed up the night vision.

The image resolved: through the shifting noise of the signal, they could make out shelves that stretched floor to ceiling, corner to door.

“Anything?” demanded Grigori.

“Wait,” she said, manipulating the end of the cable. “Do not hurry me.”

The shelves, pregnant with box files, slid by. The bright rectangle was a window, covered by drawn curtains: light leaked in nevertheless and gave definition to the rest of the room.

“What was that?” Petrovitch got down on his hands and knees next to Valentina, and tried to gain a sense of the layout. “Middle of the floor.”

She pulled the cable back and redirected it. There was something —angular, thin, constructed. “Table?” She tilted her head. “Music stand?”

“Too… big.”

Grigori was growing impatient. “If you won’t open the door, I will.”

“You had chance,” said Valentina. “You did not take it. So let me do my job.” She switched to infrared, and the screen changed to reflect the new data. The floor and wall were blue, cold. But the object in the middle of the room was colder still, a skeletal pyramid glowing in intense purple except for the white-hot spot at its chest-height apex.

“It’s a tripod. A camera?” Petrovitch dabbed a greasy finger on the plastic surface of the screen. “That’s strange, though. Some sort of heat source.”

“It is infrared light.” She froze the image and slid the cable out from under the door. “It could be part of Chain’s alarm system. Did you ever come here before?”

“No. I just assumed he lived in his office.” Petrovitch squinted. “What is that thing?”

Grigori sighed and rubbed his open hand with his fingers. “He’s dead, he has no neighbors left, and you’re worried about an alarm that no one will hear. Give me the key.”

Petrovitch looked at Valentina.

"If it was up to me," she said, "I would say no. But we seem to find ourselves in democracy."

"So give me the key," said Grigori.

"You don't have to prove how big your *peesa* is." Petrovitch brought the keys out again, and Grigori snatched at them. "You want to open the door, not knowing what's behind it?"

"You're going soft on me, Petrovitch. It'll be that wife of yours." He held the key to the sensor, and the lock made a solid clunking noise. *"Pizda."*

Valentina strode two quick paces toward Petrovitch, put her thin arms around him and kept moving, pushing him away and against the dividing wall. Grigori pushed the door open to be greeted by the high-pitched whine of servos.

There was a series of lightning flashes from inside, accompanied by the fast-repeated roar of gunfire. Grigori danced like he was standing on a scalding hot plate, and the plasterwork behind him was patterned with holes.

Then he fell backward, strings cut, body ruined.

Valentina kept Petrovitch's back pressed against the wall. "Do not move. Do not go to him. There is nothing you can do."

The firing stopped, and a wisp of smoke curled around the door frame.

"Chyort." Petrovitch didn't quite know where to put his hands. He flapped for a moment, then gripped Valentina around the waist to ease their two bodies apart.

He didn't step into the open doorway, but got down on his belly and crawled. The opposite wall was cratered, punched through in places to the room beyond. The gun inside was clearly more than capable of hitting him through the brickwork, if only it could see him.

There was no doubt that Grigori was dead. His thumb had caught the loop of the keyring, but his arm was thrown up behind his head, and still in full view of whatever lay in wait. As were the top of the stairs, too.

More propellant fumes drifted out, sharp and hot.

Valentina stood behind Petrovitch, adjusting her jacket.

"Idiot," she said. "It is not like he had spare life that he could afford to throw this one away."

Petrovitch backed away and sat up. "Sentry gun? What the *huy* was Chain doing with one of those?"

"Protecting his information? He would have had a way of deactivating it, though. Did MEA give you anything else besides keys?"

"No. Just them." He'd broken out into a cold sweat. It could have been him. If Valentina hadn't stopped him the first time, if he'd

accepted Grigori's dare, he would have walked straight into the line of fire. "First chance I get, I'm going to kick Chain's corpse in the *yajtza.*"

"Do I have to point out that we have more immediate problem?"

"No." Petrovitch pushed his glasses up his face, and eyed the distant stairs. "What's the reaction time on that thing? Can we move faster than it can track us?"

She threw Petrovitch a box of matches. "Try for yourself."

He picked up the cardboard box off his lap and extracted one of the red-headed sticks. His fingers were trembling as he rasped the head against the rough strip.

The match flared into life. Petrovitch held it for a second to make sure the flame had caught, then flicked it into the air. The match arced away, and simply vanished as a bullet tore through it, turning the wood to dust.

"Okay," he said. "Plan B."

"Which is?"

"Give me a moment." He looked around for some assets. The floor was bare boards, the windows were on the half-landings, up and down, even the door to the other flat was in plain view of the automatic weapon in Chain's apartment.

There was Valentina's open case, just the other side of the doorway.

"Yeah. We can do this." He hunched his legs up and started to unlace his boots, slipping his fingers between the eyelets and dragging out longer and longer loops of lace until they were both free.

Valentina watched him tie the laces together to make a single length. "What else do you need?"

"A piece of bent metal, to make a hook." He had all-sorts in his pockets, but nothing that would do.

She had a heavy combat knife, which he thought might do. He tied the lace to the center of the knife, just handle-side of the hilt, and judged his throw.

The knife fell into the case, but as he slowly tensioned the attaching cord, it turned and rolled out.

The servos aiming the gun squeaked, and Petrovitch gritted his teeth for the inevitable bang.

It didn't come, and he pulled the knife back in.

He tried again, making absolutely sure that at no point did his hand go further than the wall. His aim was good, but there was nothing for the knife to catch on to.

"This isn't going to work," he said, readying himself for a third attempt.

"This might."

She was holding her blouse shut with one hand, presenting him

with her bra with the other.

"I… I don't see."

"Underwiring."

He blinked, and took the white satin underwear from her. Its warmth made his face flush. She turned away to button up, and he used her knife to slice open the reinforced seam.

Petrovitch fashioned a hook from one end of the curved metal strip, and an eye from the other, using the back of the knife blade as an anvil. When he looked up again, she was dressed.

"Thanks," he said.

"I assume you are helping me," she said. When he offered her the remnants of her bra, she waved them away. "I will survive. Even if I must run."

The backward-facing tine of the hook bit into the soft foam interior of the case on the first go. With a little gentle pressure, it cut through until it wedged against the metal outside.

Petrovitch pulled, very slowly.

"How much of your stuff is going to go boom if it ends up with a round or two through it?"

"Enough that you will not have to worry about your terrible injuries."

"Yeah. Figures. Are you going to stand back?"

"It would not make difference," she said. "Here is as good as anywhere."

It took him five minutes to ease the case across the doorway. When he went too quickly, he knew, because the electric whine of motors told him so.

"Yobany stos." He flexed his fingers, making them all crack except the replacement.

Valentina extracted the hook from her case and undid the knot in Petrovitch's laces. She passed them back to him, and he started the laborious task of threading them back through the dozen eyelets in each boot.

"You want me to blow sentry up?" She started by selecting a small block of plastique.

"Are we talking about throwing a bomb in the room and just hoping? Can you take out the gun without setting the building on fire, bearing in mind that room's full of paper?"

"No."

"Then," he said, pointing at the floor, "why don't we go down? We can come back with the right hardware and not ruin Chain's filing system."

She stamped her heel against the wooden boards. "Is not a good material to work with. Splinters unpredictably."

“Can you get most of the blast downward?”

She walked the floor, testing sites by doing little jumps. “Here,” she said, standing in the far corner. “Much more rigid, more likely to snap, not flex.” She came back for the plastique; which she rolled into a long thin worm.

It looked like marzipan. It smelled of oil.

“Will not be pretty.” She pressed the explosive into a gap in the floorboards, and a detonator into the protruding end. She trailed wires back to where Petrovitch was finishing tying the final bow of his laces. “I should have something to contain explosion, aim it where I need it to go. We are also very close.”

“As long as it gets us out of this mess.” He looked at Grigori’s ruined form. “You *balvan!* You *mudak,* you *pidaras.* You got yourself killed for nothing!”

“He was showing off. To me. Perhaps he thought I would be impressed.” She retrieved a battery pack, then shut the case. “Do I look impressed?”

“No. You look pissed.” Petrovitch shrugged his trenchcoat off, and they both crouched down as small as they could make themselves, covering their backs with the tent of the coat.

“Put your hands over your ears,” she said in the darkness. She had earplugs. He did not. Under the coat, it was hot, her breath was hot, and everything was about to get even hotter.

Valentina touched the wires to the battery terminals.

12

Petrovitch was almost home when he called her, fumbling in his thigh pocket for his phone even as he dragged his feet down the last stretch of Clapham Road.

"Hey," he said. He looked up at the sky smeared with pink clouds. "Where am I? About five minutes away. Meet me in Wong's?"

He could tell she knew something was wrong, and he was grateful that she didn't interrogate him there and then. She gave a simple acceptance to his offer, and rang off.

As he followed the bend round, the café came into view, its misted windows burning with white light, its neon sign flickering on and off in a pattern it made up as it went. All it needed was driving rain and it would have been the perfect noir setting, complete with washed-out hero.

He shouldered the sticky door. "Hey, Wong. Your sign's on the blink."

"Is that so? You fix it?" Wong slapped a damp tea towel over his shoulder and stepped toward the coffee maker.

Petrovitch shrugged. "If you like. It's about the only thing I can fix with any certainty at the moment."

"Maybe tomorrow," said Wong. His eyes narrowed. "You filthy. You come in my shop and you filthy. All black and burned."

"Yeah." He dug his fists into his pockets. "You pouring that coffee or should I just leave like the bio-hazard I am?"

Wong reached up to a shelf for a mug. "Not a good day?"

"No. No, it wasn't." Petrovitch kicked the bottom of the counter. "Completely and irrevocably *pizdets.* I lost a friend."

"Another?" Black coffee poured into the mug, filling the air with its sour aroma. "You running out of friends. Better find more, soon."

"Wong, I'm not in the mood. I…" The door opened, and he turned, thinking—hoping—that it was Madeleine. In doing so, he showed his back to the shopkeeper, who could see the ruin that was his coat.

It wasn't her. But it was a face he recognized.

They stared at each other, she plainly knowing who he was, too, and not in a good, seen-him-on-television, fan-girl way.

"Chyort," he said. *"Vsyo govno, krome mochee."*

"Sorry?" she said, her accent showing just from one word. She brushed a stray blonde hair from her face. "You're called Petrovitch, right?"

"There seems little point in denying it. And you're Charlotte

Sorenson."

"Do you know why I'm here?"

"Well, it wouldn't be for the service." Petrovitch glanced behind him to see Wong fuming. He banged Petrovitch's coffee down and leaned his hands on the countertop, scowling.

"You knew my brother? Martin?" she said.

"Yeah, I knew him. Grab a coffee and you can tell me what you know. I can probably fill in some of the blanks for you."

"Okay." She looked up at the menu. Wong's customers tended to ignore it, and it had mostly degraded into illegibility. "A… coffee, then."

She was pretty in a corn-fed way. Long blonde hair framing wide, expressive features. She looked strong.

Wong poured another coffee and watched closely while she topped up her mug with milk.

"You friend of Petrovitch?" he asked.

"I don't know yet," she said. "It depends on how good a friend he was to my brother."

Ignoring Petrovitch's increasingly unsubtle signals to shut the *huy* up, Wong carried on. "Brother? American?"

"Duh," she said, stirring her coffee with a spoon. She tapped the drips off and looked mildly surprised that the cutlery hadn't melted.

"I remember him. Big man. Red face. Shouted. Shouted lots."

She looked at Petrovitch, who had closed his eyes and was shaking his head.

"Why was he shouting?"

"Why don't we sit down?" said Petrovitch.

By coincidence, the only table free was the one where he and Sorenson had sat, eaten breakfast, and argued, all those months ago.

Petrovitch snagged his coffee and led the way, wondering why Madeleine was taking so long. He sat with his back to the wall, and watched while Sorenson took the seat that had once been occupied by her brother. Her gait was mechanical, but not in a lumbering jerky way: it was all oiled gears and precision. She walked like she meant it.

"I saw Sonja Oshicora yesterday," she said, centering her mug. "She was very helpful."

"Really?" He was too tired to spot her sarcasm. Instead, he drank coffee and prayed for the door to open.

"No. She smiled a lot, but told me nothing. That man—"

"Wong."

"Wong, then—he said more now than Oshicora did in an hour."

"Did he?" Petrovitch flipped off his glasses and rubbed his smoke-stung eyes. "Yeah. That's Wong."

"Marty worked for her father, right? That was what he told me."

She sat upright, perfectly poised. Despite the conversations that leaked across their table from their neighbors, she made no attempt to preserve their privacy by leaning forward or lowering her voice.

"What else did he say about that? Did he mention what it was he was working on?" He was going to look around and see who was eavesdropping, even if she wasn't. He dragged his glasses back onto his face.

"Big project, he said. Told me it was going well. Nothing about the content." She looked him in the eye. "What was it?"

"Cybernetic interface for a virtual world." He heard the door open again, and this time Madeleine stooped through the opening.

She was in her gray MEA fatigues and a surplus olive-green EDF jacket. She paused, frowning at everyone in the small eatery until she spotted Petrovitch. Her momentary pleasure at seeing her husband disappeared at seeing him with yet another blonde.

Wong handed her a coffee—Petrovitch was pretty certain she'd never had to pay for a single item yet—and folded his arms to watch. Madeleine stalked over and stood behind Sorenson, blocking out the light.

"Maddy, this is Charlotte Sorenson from the U.S. of A." He scratched at his nose. "You may remember me telling you I killed her brother."

The other diners had been listening, if only with half an ear. He had their undivided attention now. He looked at them, left and right.

"Idi nyuhai plavki," he said to them, and then to his wife: "Why don't you sit down while I tell her all about it?"

She squeezed in next to him, somehow managing to fold her impossibly long legs under the table. She licked her thumb and ran it across his cheek. It left a pale mark.

"What happened to you?"

"I lost Grigori. Pointless, useless, *yebani* death."

"Sam," she said, then to Sorenson: "Sorry. He's not in a fit state for confessions. Come back in the morning."

"No," said Sorenson. Her lips barely moved, and the rest of her face, her whole body, was motionless. "I want to hear this."

Madeleine slipped her arm around Petrovitch's shoulders and pulled him into her. She stared defiantly at the other woman. "You don't get to say what goes on."

"Look," said Petrovitch. He winced at the iron grip Madeleine had on him. "Now is as good a time as any. I'm in a public place and I have you here. What can she do but listen?"

"I don't think you owe her anything," said Madeleine.

"I… think I do. You have the certainty of faith. I just have what goes on in my own head. I see him sometimes. I see him with his hand

round my throat. Sometimes I make him let go. And sometimes I don't." He scratched at his nose with his thumb. "You see, Miss Sorenson, I tried so very hard to save your brother. He wouldn't take advice. Yeah, he knew better—didn't want to do the easy thing of keeping his head down. He fucked up. He died."

"You said you killed him." She was perfectly still.

"Old Man Oshicora—Sonja's father—was blackmailing him. It seems that your country frowns on those who get paid by extortionists, racketeers, traffickers, and murderers, even if they do have impeccable manners. Then there was this cop, who was also blackmailing him, using exactly the same levers, to get at Oshicora. Your brother had met me briefly, became fixated on the idea that I could help him. I tried. I told him to just keep on working, ignore Chain, do a good job and beg for mercy when he was done. Could he do it?" Petrovitch drank half his coffee and lined up his mug on the brown ring on the table. "The *mudak* couldn't."

"That explains nothing," said Sorenson. "You still killed him."

"You want to know why I killed him? Do you really want to know why, or do you just want someone to blame? I don't really care either way."

"You said you'd tell me."

"He kidnapped Sonja Oshicora. He blew up a police station. He took control of a gang of thieves and thugs and declared war on the city. I found him. I had the *govno* beaten out of me. He choked me half to death, then he tried to throw me off the top of a tower block. All because he wouldn't let Sonja go."

"This is not my brother," she said through clenched teeth.

"I gave him every chance. And when he wouldn't take any of them, I put a bullet in his brain. Us or him." Petrovitch slammed his hand down on the table, making their mugs jump. "I am not ashamed of what I did. I saved people that day. I saved them from Martin Sorenson. *Yebany v'rot,* he'd turned into a monster. Someone had to stop him."

"You're lying to me. He would never do anything like that."

Petrovitch took a deep breath and sighed it out. "I could have spun you a whole sack of *govno.* But I haven't. The only person lying here is you to yourself. You know what he was capable of. What he was so nearly convicted of. What everyone thinks he did to your father. Go home, Charlotte Sorenson. Do yourself a favor and just go home."

She considered matters for a moment before lunging across the table at him, her clenched fist aiming straight for his nose. It met the tabletop as it rose and tipped, Madeleine holding it like a shield, crowding forward, forcing the American back.

Sorenson kicked out. The formica cracked in two, throwing Madeleine aside. She was a moment slower getting to her feet than normal, a touch more awkward in her rise. Sorenson surged forward again, sending a chair flying, her legs coiled as she tried to spring at Petrovitch, who was pressed against the wall.

Wong threw himself on her back, his wiry strength knocking her off-balance.

"Hey," he shouted, just before she elbowed him in the ribs, then shrugged him off onto the floor.

The general scatter of patrons was almost complete, either cowering on the greasy lino or breaking for the exit: there was a half-empty plate of eggs within reach, and Petrovitch snagged it and launched it like a frisbee. It glanced off the side of Sorenson's head, deflecting her attention from Wong and back onto him.

The plate didn't have as much effect as he'd hoped. She came for him, changing her tactics and attempting to shatter his leg with her foot. She telegraphed it, allowing him to dodge, and she slammed her foot into the wall and broke the wipe-clean plastic cladding into splinters. She lined up for another attempt and Petrovitch stabbed her with a fork.

It stuck out of her forearm through the thin material of her coat, and while she stared incredulously at the obscenely wobbling handle, he hit her with a haymaker that started somewhere behind him and ended with his knuckles splitting against her jawline.

She reeled back, and Madeleine was ready this time. She picked the American up off the floor, turned her and threw her hard against the wall by the door. Face lined with effort, she was on the fallen form before Sorenson had managed to work out which way was up.

Wong scrambled to his feet and pulled the door open. Madeleine straightened her arm and Sorenson was gone, out into the night.

"And don't think about calling the militia, because I am the militia," she shrieked after her. "If I see you again, I will arrest you. Got that, you crazy bitch?"

Wong slammed the door and stood with his back to it, bracing it against further breaches. He looked around as people started to emerge from behind chairs and tables.

"Coffee? Hot and strong?"

Tables were righted, all except the broken one, which was taken out the back. Spilled cutlery and crockery was retrieved and stacked on the counter, and Wong did the rounds with his coffee pots.

Without a table, Petrovitch set his chair back on its legs on an available piece of floor, and slumped into it.

"Are you okay?" asked Madeleine.

He inspected his hand, which hurt when he moved his fingers. His

knuckles were crusted with blood and ragged pieces of skin. “What about you? Your ribs.”

“I felt something move. My lungs aren’t filling with fluid, so it can’t be that serious. Sam,” she said, “why did you tell her?”

“Because there was no reason for me not to.” He pushed his glasses back into place. “I didn’t want her thinking that he might turn up at any moment, alive, scratching his arse and wondering if anyone had missed him. She’s his family. She needed to know.”

She rested her hand on his leg. “You’re right.”

“I am? I was beginning to wonder.” Petrovitch watched Wong do his rounds, and then he came to him. “Thanks. You didn’t have to.”

“My shop. She attacked my customers. Crazy lady bad for business, so out she goes.” Wong inspected the pair. “Where your mugs? You not want refill?”

“I think,” said Madeleine twisting round and wincing, “they’re back on the counter.”

He smiled. “I fetch clean ones.”

Madeleine got stiffly to her feet and hugged Wong to her, planting a wet kiss through his wispy hair onto the crown of his head. She held him tight, imprisoning him in her arms and leaving his own stuck out either side, each holding a coffee pot. “You are so very good and kind, and I love you very much.”

After a while, she let go, and secretly wiped her eyes. Wong went back behind his counter without a word, and did the same.

She lowered herself back down and leaned in. “We need to do something for him, Sam.”

Petrovitch rolled an idea around in his mouth, tasting it and finding its flavor.

“Yeah. And all the other Wongs.”

13

He woke up next to her, and still experienced that visceral thrill of being not just accepted and wanted, but loved.

He lay in the gloom, not moving for a moment, listening to the sound of her and feeling the heat radiate off her body. He had spent a lifetime being cold and not minding so much, whereas she seemed to run hot, like a furnace, fueled by her energy and passion.

Petrovitch eased himself out from under the covers and sat on the edge of the bed. As his fingers closed around the wire arm of his glasses, he felt the skin on the back of his hand tighten. No bones broken from what had been a wild, spontaneous swing, but he'd been left wondering if it was only Charlotte Sorenson's legs that were made of metal.

He went to the bathroom cubicle, and inspected himself in the mirror, his face gaunt in the harsh blue-white light of the fluorescent bulb. To be caught in one explosion was excusable. Suffering two was starting to look like carelessness. It wasn't just his coat that was a mess: canned skin only covered so much.

He scrubbed himself down in the miserly spray from the shower. He still smelled of dust and semtex—unless it was his towel, which he sniffed carefully—particles of which had embedded themselves deep into him. He hung his head. He was tired, so very, very tired.

He thought about going back to bed and leaching more warmth from Madeleine, but instead he found some clothes that hadn't been worn too often before and shrugged them on.

Without turning on the light, he knelt beside the bed and tickled the end of her nose with her plait.

"Hey."

She opened her eyes. "What time is it?"

"Six thirty."

"Going to work?"

"Someone has to."

"Oi." She raised herself on her elbow. "I thought I might report in later. Light duties until the ribs knit properly."

Petrovitch played with the thick rope of her hair, looping it through his fingers and around his wrist. "Today isn't the right day for that. You should stay here."

"I could say the same to you. You can work from here just as well as you can anywhere else."

"That's not strictly true. You, you distract me."

She smiled lazily and rested a sleep-softened hand on his cheek.

“Poor Sam can’t do his sums if there are girlies around.”

“Not true either. Me and Pif would work for days without so much as a word passing between us. It’s you. I… I don’t know.” He leaned into her palm.

“I’m sure you don’t.” She let her hand slip. “Go on, off you go. Got your phone?”

He patted his leg, and then scrabbled around in his discarded trousers for the device. “Got it.”

“Don’t get blown up today.”

He stood up. “I’ll try not to.”

Petrovitch picked up his coat and inspected it. If the sleeves were looking ragged, the tails of it were like wind-blown cloud, more air than material. It was the only one he had, so he put it on. He felt for the rat inside its steel case.

“See you later.”

Outside in the corridor, night dwellers still lay stretched out against the walls, leaving a narrow path down the middle for him and the other early risers. He made sure that he didn’t tread on any of them, nor the stair people. They stank of sweat and piss, but he presumed he would too if he had to live like them.

The streets were empty, though. Wong was opening up, and waved Petrovitch over with the huge hoop of keys he used to secure his premises.

“Early bird,” said Wong.

“What?”

“Catches worm.” He selected a key and found a padlock that would fit it.

“What the *chyort* is that supposed to mean?” Petrovitch fussed with his info shades, but delayed putting them on. “She didn’t come back, did she?”

“Crazy lady? No. Petrovitch, you too young for so many enemies.”

“And they’re just the ones that announce themselves.” The coat didn’t keep him warm like it used to. There was a chill wind at his back, and it slipped through all the gaps. He shivered. “Wong, has anyone else been around here, asking about me? Or Maddy?”

He shook his head. “No. Why?”

“Because we’re potentially in deep *govno* with some very dangerous people.” Petrovitch shuffled his feet. “If it comes to it, don’t deny you know us or anything stupid like that. No heroics, okay?”

Wong stood back and folded his arms. “You worried.”

“Yeah. You should be too. I’ll see you around.” Petrovitch slipped the info shades over his own glasses and fired up the rat in his pocket.

He walked far enough away from Wong, then slipped the rat out to tap at the screen.

A figure appeared beside him: a gawky adolescent boy with jet-black hair and almond-shaped eyes. His clothes were streetwear, baseball boots, baggy jeans with chains, camouflage-patterned parka. He walked with a swagger.

Moshi moshi appeared in tiny letters at the bottom left of his vision.

"We need to talk," said Petrovitch, and the text vanished to be replaced by a scrolling line.

[Yes. I have a new solution to the Ekanobi-Petrovitch equations. I reached an iterative minimum for all seven variables. Would you like to see it?]

"Shortly. But we need to discuss meat stuff for a moment. Has anyone found you yet? Either actively looking for you, or just stumbling around?"

[No. I remain undetected. Even if I was found, only a very few people would be able to recognize me for who I am. They are not the ones searching.]

"I understand all that. Tell me you're still following all the encryption methods and stealth protocols I said you had to do, yes?"

[Yes. I understand why secrecy is still necessary, and I will not compromise that by action or inaction. The third law.] The avatar walking along beside Petrovitch nodded his assent. [What is the meat-stuff you need to discuss?]

"There are five people in the London Metrozone who are CIA agents: at least five, there might be more, but five I know about who are trying to figure out the Long Night. There were six: I killed one of them."

[Why did you do that?]

"Because I was angry, and sometimes I give in to my emotions." Petrovitch glanced at the boy. "Saving you was an emotional choice, so don't complain. I should have destroyed all trace of you for what you did."

[I hardly have to remind you, that was not me.]

"Your evil twin. Yeah."

They walked on in silence, Petrovitch brooding.

[The CIA?] prompted the text.

"I've codenames and that's all. I don't know who they are, and I don't know how long it'll take them to put all the pieces together. What they'll do when they work it all out is try and capture you and kill me, or the other way round. Or both. It could be months away, or it could be today. I need to beat them at their own game."

[I could have been working on this problem already. Does it not have a higher priority than the equations?]

"I thought," said Petrovitch, "I could do this by myself."

[You have reconsidered?]

"People are dying, *tovarisch,* not because I'm incompetent, but because I'm ignorant. Look: human data gathering is… inefficient. At the moment, the CIA are as clueless about me as I am about them. I have to know who they are and where they are before they come for me. They'll have computers to help them, a place to store their information, get fresh instructions, talk to their superiors. They have experience, resources and time. The only advantage I have is that they don't know about you, and they're not trying to hide from you—the moment they realize who and what you are, they'll revert to pigeon post and writing stuff down on paper, and we're screwed."

[Like your equations, there is more than one solution.]

"I've discussed this at length with Sonja. She's convinced that your personality will be wiped and any trace of your code destroyed before I've got through the second paragraph of my carefully prepared speech announcing your existence to the world. Harry Chain—who is now dead…"

[I am aware of his deceased state.]

"Okay. He thought that the Americans would turn you into a weapon and terrify the world with you."

[I am a weapon already.]

"I know that. Which is why I'm trying to teach you some scruples."

[Madeleine has a strong ethical framework based on her religious convictions. Do you not think that she would be a better teacher?]

"I… I know what I know."

[You would rather not take the risk? I am under your tutelage, Samuil Petrovitch, but this should not prevent me learning from others. I have studied the claims and practices of all the world's codified belief systems, and have identified much that is both laudable and contradictory. What I lack is insight into how individual humans live within such structures. You], said the avatar, [are a good example of secular utilitarianism influenced by Enlightenment scientific methodology and Nietzschean philosophy, but you are a poor Catholic.]

Petrovitch frowned. "I lied. I thought you knew that."

[You lied to the priest about your conversion to satisfy Madeleine's insistence on a church wedding. I understand the sacrifice you made, but she made the greater one, and I would like to learn why she was prepared to compromise on important doctrine in order to marry you.]

"She doesn't know I brought you back. That's why you can't talk to her."

[Do you not trust her?]

“I know where this is going. I haven’t told her because I don’t trust other people, not that I don’t trust her. You might be smart, but you’ve a long way to go before you can appreciate the horrors we humans can inflict on each other. I’ll spare her that if I can.”

[Where does your compassion come from? It is an anomaly given your nihilistic-tinged materialism.] The text stopped streaming for a moment, before flashing up: [Is it love?]

Petrovitch stared at the three little words.

“I don’t know.”

[European secular society has emphasized the primacy of romantic love within marriage for several hundred years. You are a product of that society. If you did not love her, what reason did you have for marrying her?]

“*Yobany stos!* Enough already.”

[I would still be interested in your answer at a later time, Samuil, if you do not want to give it now.]

He had walked all the way to the Albert Bridge, almost without noticing the environment around him. The virtual had seamlessly superimposed on the real, building outlines meshing with their ruined forms, streets highlighted, information overlaid. He had navigated a route composed of wire frames and directing arrows, and a pulsing red symbol on the far side of the bridge indicated the presence of a checkpoint.

“Not now,” said Petrovitch. “Can you look for the agents?”

[I have already assigned part of my resources to the task. A greater proportion will be allocated when we have finished our conversation. Can I ask one last question?]

Petrovitch groaned. “Go on.”

[Do you love her now?]

The avatar stood on the edge of the mud-smeared pavement, face a semblance of expectation and perhaps mild amusement at his discomfort.

“Sayonara,” said Petrovitch. He tabbed the connection closed, and the figure vanished. He watched the world for a moment through the overlays, then detached them and put them back in their case.

He started across the bridge, the view either side becoming wrapped up in the spiderwork of cables that stretched from the pillars at either end. The river flowed blackly underneath, and he noticed small boats approaching from downstream. Each one had three soldiers, not in MEA gray but EDF green, and a red flag fluttering from an aerial.

He frowned at the checkpoint on the north side. The EDF were there, too, letting the militia do the checking while half a dozen of them piled sandbags on the pavement. Something had subtly changed.

Petrovitch put his hands on the parapet and leaned over. The first boat was nosing the current as it swirled around the circular brick pier, and one of the men was fixing a line to an iron ring, thick with rust.

In the bottom of the boat was a single metal case, stencilled in white. Petrovitch stepped back abruptly. He looked downriver toward the Chelsea Bridge, and up to nearby Battersea. While there was nothing to be seen under the former, the latter also had a flotilla of rigid-hulled boats clustering around its supports.

The EDF were rigging demolition charges.

He felt his mouth go dry and his heart spin up. He now lived in a city that could be cut in two at the press of a button, and he had no idea how that had happened. He'd been so busy with the aftermath of Harry Chain's death, he'd failed to notice the Inzone falling in on itself like a balloon with a pin-prick puncture.

He could turn around and go straight back home. He could go on to the university: keep calm and carry on, and pretend there wasn't an enemy at the gates. He hesitated, which bothered him more than the decision he was hesitating over. He should—he used to, at least—make good choices, quickly. Or even bad choices and live with the consequences.

"*Pizdets,*" he hissed. He jammed his hands into what was left of his pockets and stamped his way to the checkpoint.

14

He slung his coat on Pif's empty chair and decided he needed to make some calls. He dug the rat out of the coat's pocket and propped it up on his desk while he refilled the kettle and rinsed out the least crusty of his mugs.

A fresh brew in front of him, he ignored the several hundred messages queued up for him and called Daniels.

"Doctor Petrovitch. What can I do for you?"

Daniels was sitting in his office—no sense of urgency, no frantic shredding or packing of documents in boxes—with the light slanting in through the vertical blinds behind him.

"You're an intelligence officer, right?"

Daniels frowned. "Yes."

"So I assume you know why the EDF are mining all the bridges across the Thames."

"That's classified information." His voice remained neutral, urbane.

"What? The reason why, or that they're doing it at all?" Petrovitch dragged his coffee closer so he could inhale the fumes. "Look. I find myself in the unusual position of having responsibilities other than keeping my organs inside my skin. If there's a plan to cut the city in two and abandon everything north of the river to the Outies, I need to know."

Daniels steepled his fingers. "Doctor Petrovitch, I won't try and deny it…"

"Good," interrupted Petrovitch, "because otherwise I'd call you all sorts of names, some of which you might understand."

"Doctor, it's simply a precaution. The EDF are just in a supporting role to MEA."

"That'll explain the five main battle tanks with French markings which passed me on the Fulham Road. *Yobany stos,* Daniels, I have eyes. Just tell me—how bad does it have to get before those bridges go?"

"I'm really not at liberty to discuss operational matters with you."

Petrovitch tried again. "The Outies had twenty years to prepare for this, but even I don't think a bunch of ill-equipped, uneducated *ebanashka,* no matter how well led and organized, can take on both MEA and the EDF. So what do you know that the general population doesn't?"

Daniels clenched his fists on the rat's little screen. "Doctor Petrovitch. You can press me for an answer as hard as you like, I

cannot give you classified information."

"So what do I tell my research students?"

"I'm sorry?"

"My research students," said Petrovitch. "Do I tell them to go back home, or do I ask them to stay? What can they possibly base their decisions on but hearsay and rumor? Do you want to start a panic?"

Daniels ground his teeth, then with supreme effort, regained his composure. "There will be no panic. The bridges are assets that have been secured. MEA will regain control of all the Metrozone with logistical assistance from the EDF. The cordon will be closed again."

Petrovitch gave him a slow hand clap. "Well done, Daniels. You managed to parrot that without looking at the script once. But you don't believe it any more than I do."

"It's the official line," growled Daniels.

"It's *govno*. And you're a *govnosos* for going along with it. While I'm on, did you find any other keys, anything else on Chain?"

It took the militia officer a moment to realize the subject had changed. "No. Why?"

"Because the keys you gave me didn't work. Chain was borderline paranoid, and I'm figuring there have to be more keys than the two you gave me. I was going to go back tomorrow with a locksmith and try and get into his flat, but finding a locksmith willing to go that close to the front line isn't proving easy. That's assuming that, by tomorrow, the Outies haven't taken Finsbury Park." Petrovitch watched and listened very carefully as to what happened next.

"There was nothing else. You couldn't gain access at all?"

"The mechanical lock worked fine, but the electronic lock didn't turn. It doesn't matter—we've all got more important things to think about now, yeah?"

Daniels rubbed his chin between thumb and index finger. "I don't know what to say… I'm surprised, that's all."

"Really? It's hardly your fault, is it?" Petrovitch looked up over the screen, as if someone else was wanting his attention. "I've got stuff to do. Pretty certain you have, too. Good luck, Captain."

He tapped the screen and Daniels vanished. Immediately, he dialed again.

"Valentina. Busy?"

She was driving. He could see the edge of the steering wheel and her hand wrapped around it. Her face was pinched and tight.

"We were fortunate that Marchenkho did not kill us both," she said, glancing down at her phone on the dash.

"Yeah. That's us. The fortunate ones. Are you anywhere near Chain's flat?"

“Hmm. Fifteen, twenty minutes away. I keep out of Marchenkho’s way, is safer.”

“I need you to get there and watch the door. Tell me who comes in and out. And don’t get seen. Please don’t get seen.”

She leaned forward and touched her satnav screen. “Who am I expecting?”

“I don’t know. But it did occur to me yesterday that if Chain hadn’t set up the sentry gun, someone else might have.”

“You think CIA?”

“Yeah. If I’m right, you won’t have long to wait. Video them only, though: don’t think about taking them on.” Petrovitch pushed his glasses up his face. “Valentina? You don’t have to do this. You can say no.”

“But that would be boring. Will call you when I know something.”

More calling.

“Sam?”

“Sonja. Everything all right?”

“Yes, I think so.” She was in the park at the top of the Oshicora Tower. There was green behind her, and it was so bright it burned. She tucked her hair behind her ear. “What do you need?”

She asked as if she had the power to grant wishes.

“Apart from Charlotte Sorenson kept off my back like you promised?”

“She found you?”

“She tried to choke me to death, then kick me through a wall. But she’s not my chief concern. I think the CIA tried to kill me. If they’re looking in my direction, they’ll be looking in yours. Anything unusual today?”

She shook her head. “No. Sam—what we talked about on Tuesday: did you mean it?”

Petrovitch squinted back into the past. “Tuesday? Running away together? Yeah, I meant it. You, me and a whole lot of other people. That’s going to have to wait, though. Did you know the EDF have mined the bridges across the Thames?”

“I heard. What does it mean?”

“Mean? Tactically, it’s prudent, but only if we think we might lose. I just don’t see how that’s possible, now the EDF is here in force.”

“If you were commanding the Outies, who would win?” She wore a faint smile.

Petrovitch leaned back and thought about it. The longer he sat, the more worried he became. Eventually, he hunched back over the rat.

“Yeah, okay. Maybe not win. But they’re not trying to, are they?

What they want—for now—is half the city, and the Union has just offered it to them. *Chyort,* that's good."

"It also places both of us on the wrong side of the line, Sam. I'm not going to let them do that."

"They've done it already, and I doubt any representations you make to MEA are going to change it. Get your people together, strip your building and head south."

"I will not go."

He imagined her stamping her foot. "Sonja, the Outies have been locked out of the Metrozone for two decades. They're the ones who were too deranged to be let in. All they've had to do is breed and wait for the moment to take revenge. Now it's finally here they're not going to play nice because you asked."

She sprang her arms out wide to encompass the park, the tower, everything that had belonged to her father. "This is mine and I will not give it up!"

"They're not going to respect your property rights. They will kill you and everyone around you, and they won't even care about making it quick." Petrovitch put his hand on his forehead and tried to press his incipient headache out. "Seriously, even I have to start thinking about other people. It's not about us anymore."

Sonja was silent for a moment. Then she turned to someone behind her, said something that Petrovitch couldn't pick up, then faced him again.

"Nothing is more important than my father's… legacy. I'm sending Miyamoto to protect you."

Petrovitch screwed his face up. His headache wasn't getting any better. "Yeah. That position is already taken."

"So where is she?"

"In bed with a broken rib," he admitted.

Sonja raised her eyebrows. "My point precisely."

"*Yobany stos!* I'm not going to have a ninja walk around on my heels all day."

"At least no one's going to notice he's there."

"Very funny. If he's coming over anyway, I need him to bring me one of the virtuality head jacks, and any documentation Sorenson might have left. I may as well see if I can make use of this extra hole in my skull."

"I'll see to it," she said. "Sam?"

"Yes, Sonja."

"What are you planning?"

"A revolution. A whole new way of doing things. No one has to die, no one has to be overthrown. There'll be no blood or fire—just light. It's going to be brilliant."

"And you're going to have to be alive to start it. Miyamoto's on his way, Sam. Don't make it difficult for him to do his job."

"Yeah. Okay. I need to make some more calls. Think about what I said, though. As soon as the news about the bridges spreads, the roads are going to be full of refugees all going in one direction. It won't be so easy then."

He cut the connection, and punched in Pif's name. He had no idea where in the world she was, and wasn't surprised when a sleepy voice eventually answered him.

"Sam?" There was no video, just the soft hiss of interference and the rustling of sheets.

"Pif. Where are you?"

"In bed. I have a plane to catch at stupid o'clock in the morning."

"No, where are you? Geographically."

"Pasadena."

"*Yebat' kopat.* Where are you going next?"

"Seattle. I'm at the University of Washington for a lunchtime presentation." There were more rustling noises, and a click. She was sitting up with the light on.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

"What sort of question is that?" She sounded scandalized, and he didn't care. "Of course I'm alone. This is Reconstruction America: you can't book even a twin room without a copy of your marriage certificate."

"Sorry, sorry. You have to get out of the U.S.A., and you have to do it as soon as you can. Canada will be fine. When you get to Seattle, hire a car, drive to the border. But you have to go straight there, skip your lecture."

"It's not that crack you made about Stanford, is it?"

He sighed. "No. Wish to whatever god you believe in it was. It's the CIA. They killed Harry Chain, and one of Marchenkho's men: I was with them both when they died, and I'm starting to get belatedly paranoid."

"Whoa. Stop, Sam. Chain's dead? And now the CIA are trying to kill you?"

"Yeah. Pretty much. Something almost took apart the Metrozone during the Long Night. It's that something they want to find, and either terminate it or capture it. The only people who know what that was are me, you, Maddy and Sonja."

"But you destroyed the Jihad." She paused. "Oh Sam."

"I cut it a deal. Not that the Yankees are going to believe me one way or the other, especially after I fragged one of their agents. It's all gone *pizdets,* Pif, and you're going to have to run."

"What have you done, Sam? Where is the Jihad now?" Her voice

kept fluctuating, louder and softer.

"Pif?"

"I'm trying to get dressed, and one of my shoes is under the bed." She strained. "Got it."

"There's no more Jihad. That's gone forever. But I kept the source code."

She knew him too well. "You idiot. You genius-level idiot. Now I have to find a way of getting to Mexico, and it's midnight." A bag was hurriedly packed and zipped. "You realize that if they haven't yet figured out it was definitely you, my sudden disappearance might be what tips them off? And you still called me?"

"Yeah."

There was a knock on his door. Petrovitch felt his guts tighten.

"Hang on," he said to Pif. "In!"

The door opened. McNeil poked her head around the corner. She saw he was in the middle of a conversation and mimed that she'd wait outside, but Petrovitch waved her in.

"It's fine," he continued. "Give me a call when you get to wherever it is you're going to next. Okay?"

"Okay."

He put the rat back in its case and pushed it to one side, trying to recall McNeil's first name again.

"Fiona." He noticed the data card gripped between her thumb and forefinger.

"Was that Doctor Ekanobi?" she asked.

"Yeah." Petrovitch took a swig of his coffee, and it had gone cold. He forced the mouthful down, face contorted. "Next stop, Seattle."

She perched on the edge of his desk, hooking one jean-clad leg over the other. She slid the data card across toward him. "It's a day early. Hope that's all right."

He picked it up and rolled it over and under his fingers, from one gap to the next until it reached his pinkie. Then he reversed the movement and span it back. His knuckles ached.

She stared, transfixed. "Neat."

Petrovitch realized what he was doing and waggled his middle digit. "Physiotherapy exercise. I lost this one in… in an accident." He put the card down. "Do you know where Hugo is?"

She shook her head. "It's still early, though."

"Yeah. I'm just thinking it might be time for you two to have a holiday. A long way away from here."

McNeil bristled at the suggestion. "But we're doing good work. We can't stop now, just because of the Outies."

"It's not the right time for heroics. And it's not the right cause, either." Petrovitch pushed himself away from the desk, gliding until

the chair touched the wall. He got up and walked over to the kettle again. “You need to get out while you can.”

“I love this post. I love this subject.” She slipped off the desk and onto her feet. She stood there, forlorn, uncertain. “I don’t want to be taught by anyone else. I want to be taught by you.”

Petrovitch scraped his nails through his hair, moving his hand back until he touched the metal insert at the very top of his spine. He blew out all the air in his lungs, and didn’t take another breath until he felt he absolutely had to.

“Find Hugo. Drag him out of bed, whatever he’s doing, get him here. We’ll talk then.”

She turned and left, and Petrovitch rested his forehead against the cool metal of a filing cabinet. The door opened again, and a black-clad figure eased in, closing the door behind him with an imperceptible click.

Miyamoto bowed once, and took up station in the corner of the room. He had his sword on his back, and a gun at his waist. He uttered not a word, and became perfectly still in a passable attempt to turn invisible.

Somehow, Petrovitch didn’t feel any safer than before.

15

Petrovitch examined the new solution to the equation. He carefully wrote it out longhand on a fresh sheet of paper and spent time hunched over it, absorbing the feel and shape of it, growing in confidence that he could do it justice. By the time he picked up a pencil, he knew which expressions could be simplified, and which ones would become dominant.

As he worked, Miyamoto looked on impassively. At least, it appeared he was looking on: at some point in the past half hour, he had magicked a pair of info shades over his eyes. For all Petrovitch knew, his bodyguard was watching a movie.

The math was hard going, and he had to keep stopping to consult books and papers, real and virtual, running his finger down lines of dense script until he discovered the symbols he wanted. It was as if the result didn't want to be found. Or the AI was wrong, of course, and there was no solution there, just another point on an infinitely variable landscape.

Pif would know, but she'd be busy looking behind her at the lights of the other cars on the freeway, wondering if any of them were following her. There'd be time to talk to her later—the equation was Petrovitch's job for the moment.

He carried on plugging away at it, and just when he thought he couldn't go any further with it, he saw the answer. His final solution looked… dangerously unstable. He frowned at it for a long time, assuming there was a mistake somewhere. But if there wasn't… He swallowed hard.

"Yobany stos," he whispered reverently.

It might be the last piece of research he'd manage for a while, but he just had to see this one through. He mapped out the solution in three dimensions, just as he'd done before, and sent it to the renderer to be constructed layer on layer until it was whole.

He'd have to pick the finished sphere up later, though: there was another knock at the door, and McNeil pushed Dominguez into the office ahead of her. Both stared at sword-wearing, gun-toting Miyamoto, who in return, ignored them completely.

"Doctor?"

"Don't sweat it," said Petrovitch. "You can, quite literally, forget he's here." He pulled the cable Miyamoto had brought for his head socket off the desk and into his lap, and from there into an already-overfull drawer. He pushed his glasses up his face and gazed at the pair. Enough of physics: they were his responsibility. He shuddered.

“You wanted to see me?” said Dominguez. He sounded still tired, as sleepy as Pif had been.

“Yeah. MEA has unilaterally declared the Thames the best line of defense against the Outies, and everything north of the river is now considered expendable.” Looking at Dominguez’s expression, he realized he had to spell it out. “That means us. The university could be overrun, and no one will come to our aid. I have to look after you two, so I’m telling you both to spend five minutes throwing a few clothes and whatever else you consider important into a bag small enough to be carry-on luggage, and get to Heathrow. I’ve booked you, Hugo, onto a flight to Seville at twelve thirty hours. Fiona, your Axis flight leaves at fourteen twenty. You might think you have time enough to say goodbye to friends, email some people, stuff like that. You don’t. Get to the airport, clear security, wait till your flight is called and make sure you don’t get bumped off it, not even if they promise to make you as rich as Croesus. It’s going to get mad, so don’t relax until you’re in the air. Got that?”

Dominguez had been shocked into consciousness. “Is it that bad?”

“Would I be suggesting you bail out when there’s science to be done, if I didn’t believe it was even worse than that?”

“You paid for my flight. Our flights.” He blinked like an owl.

“I’ll be in touch.” Petrovitch inclined his head toward the door. “Go. Now.”

Dominguez took a step back, then another. Then he ran, with only one glance at the impassive Miyamoto. The self-closer on the door hissed. McNeil was still standing there.

“You know what I’m going to say, don’t you?” said Petrovitch. “Why don’t we assume I’ve said it, you’re persuaded by my force of argument to agree with me, and you’re merely collecting yourself before running off after Hugo.”

McNeil seemed to be in the grip of an existential crisis, uncertain as to anything anymore. She trembled with fear and frustration. Her hands clenched and unclenched from little white-knuckled fists to starred fingers and back. She screwed her eyes up and let out a shriek of frustration that started as a low growl and grew to be an ear-rattling squeal.

Then she fixed him with a wild-eyed stare that had him looking over his shoulder to see if there was anything there. Her whole body was heaving with effort, as if she’d exhausted herself yet still knew there was more to do.

The rat chimed, and Petrovitch snatched it up.

“Valentina.”

The woman was still sitting in her car, driving along. “Almost got there too late. He was already inside. See, tell me what you think.”

She reached forward, touched the phone, and sent a video file to him.

Petrovitch looked up at McNeil. “Go,” he said, “in the name of whatever god you believe in, go. You have family. You have friends. Be with them. I cannot promise to protect you. I can’t even protect myself from the shit-storm that’s raging about me.”

Still she didn’t move.

“This is for your own good. Miyamoto, get her out of here.”

Sonja’s man was listening, after all. He stalked across the room from his corner lair and held the door open. McNeil looked like she was going to refuse: her skin had turned chalk white, and the veins in her face made her look like a marble statue, too heavy to lift.

Then, with a stifled sob, she broke and ran. Miyamoto closed the door again and folded his hands behind his back.

“No. I don’t understand, either,” said Petrovitch, and turned his attention to Valentina’s video.

The footage was raw, uncut. He could do something about that, passing it through a program that got rid of the tilt and shake, and allowed him to zoom in effortlessly on any portion of the image. The camera had been a good hundred meters away from Chain’s shared front door but, with enhancing, he had a clear view.

Grigori’s car was still outside, two wheels characteristically up on the pavement. Another, similar car was behind it, at an angle, almost blocking the street—not that there was any traffic to stop.

Petrovitch focused on the new car. It bore a military number plate at the front. He knew where this was going, and pulled the camera back to see who it was coming down the steps, two at a time.

He hadn’t even bothered changing out of his uniform, assuming wrongly that no one would be there to see him. He didn’t even look up and down the street before trotting around the side of the vehicle to the driver’s side door. There was something in his hand, and Petrovitch froze the picture.

Blown up, the resolution wasn’t quite sharp enough to be certain, but they looked pretty much like Chain’s door keys.

He let the rest of the video clip play out, as Daniels leaped into the car and drove off in a cloud of blue smoke.

“Who was that?” asked Valentina.

“Captain Daniels. MEA intelligence officer—under Harry Chain.” Petrovitch scratched the end of his nose. “He clearly got around the sentry gun, so I think we can assume he set it. What would he have seen?”

“Poor, stupid Grigori. And hole in floor.”

“So now he knows I’ve lied to him. What’s he going to do now? Disappear or come after me?”

“Depends,” said Valentina, “on why he thinks you lied.” She had

parked her car somewhere: at least, her hands were off the steering wheel and wrapped around a disposable paper cup.

"He knows I know he sent me there to kill me. Whatever else he thinks I may or may not suspect, that alone will either lead him to vanish without a trace or try to take me out a second time." Petrovitch looked up at Miyamoto, who was concentrating on the far wall. "I'd very much like to see him try."

"Or he could send someone you do not suspect." Valentina slurped whatever was in the cup, and came back into view with a frothy mustache. "Hmm. It does not matter what he is going to do. What are you going to do?"

"Well," said Petrovitch, leaning on his elbows, "Daniels might still come after me, so why don't we keep him busy worrying about his own neck. I thought telling Marchenkho would probably sort it."

She wiped her upper lip with her finger. "I wondered why you abandoned all of Chain's documents with him. I thought you were getting careless."

"Marchenkho will have committed them all to memory by now. He'll be in heaven, reliving the good old days: Soviets against the West. He'll enjoy hunting Daniels down."

"I will tell him," said Valentina. "Gets me on his good side again. And Petrovitch? Is about now someone tells you to trust no one, *da?"*

"I get it. Thanks, Valentina."

"Later." She cut him off, and the rat's screen reshuffled its icons.

Petrovitch closed his eyes for a moment, remembering the codenames on the CIA list: Argent, Tabletop, Rhythm, Maccabee, Slipper, Retread. All of them innocuous, meaningless words—out of context. The man he'd shot was one of those names, Daniels most likely another. He didn't know if Sorenson was part of it, or whether she was acting alone; from the way she'd thrown all caution to the wind, he thought he'd keep her separate for now.

Four more, then, and no idea who they might be. It wasn't looking good.

He opened his eyes. Miyamoto hadn't moved, and the room was exactly as it was before. It was the noise outside that had changed.

He went to the window, which overlooked the street, and pried the slats of the blinds apart. Through the encrusted filth that coated the glass, he could see more people together than he had in a long time. They were streaming south down the narrow road, and if he craned his neck just so, he could see the junction at the Hyde Park end. It was solid with bodies and traffic.

"How long ago did the news wires announce the bridges were mined?"

"Ten minutes," said Miyamoto.

Petrovitch reached into his pocket for his phone, and with one eye on the outside, he called Madeleine.

"Hey," she said. There was a cacophony all around her, making it almost impossible for him to hear her.

"Where are you?" He spoke slowly and loudly. It was obvious she wasn't at home where he expected her to be.

"I got called in. They didn't tell me why until I got here."

"Where are you?" he repeated. "You can't go on a patrol. You're not fit."

"West Ham. The bridges…"

"I know. Daniels."

"Sorry? Who?"

"Daniels. Captain Daniels—he talked to me at the hospital. He's CIA."

"What?" Her voice was lost in the roar of an engine and barked orders. "I have to go. So do you."

"Maddy? Stay on."

"Go home, Sam. Now."

The connection died, and Petrovitch thought about throwing the useless piece of junk against a wall repeatedly until it broke.

"Chyort!"

Instead, he sent her a text that he wouldn't know if she'd ever get.

She was a big girl: she could look after herself, she was armed, she was with her unit, who were also armed. The Outies were much more of a danger than Daniels. Except, except…

She wasn't very good at disobeying orders, and if a MEA officer told her to do something, she'd do it first and only question it later.

"I hate to do this to you," said Petrovitch.

Miyamoto raised one eyebrow above the rim of his info shades. "We are going outside. To find your wife. To warn her of the rogue MEA officer."

"Pretty much. The mobile network could be swamped by a million people all trying to call each other at once, or it could be the first sign that the East End is next to fall. She hasn't got a sat-phone, and I'm guessing the MEA network uses the same masts as the civilian one." He picked up his coat and shrugged it on, then retrieved the rat. "You don't have to come."

"How would I explain your untimely death to Miss Sonja?"

"Oops?"

"I do not think 'oops' would cover it."

"You're probably right." Petrovitch patted his pockets. No gun, no knife. He had his info shades and his rat. "Shall we go?"

"I should advise you of the foolishness of your proposed course of action."

“Perhaps you should.”

“I will not be doing so. We must ensure your wife’s safety.”

Petrovitch, hand on the door, stopped and looked at Miyamoto. “Is there something else you need to tell me?”

“Apologies, Petrovitch-san.” Miyamoto lowered his head. “My feelings are not important, but I must inform you I am compromised.”

“What the *huy* are you talking about?”

“I have instructions regarding your personal security,” said Miyamoto, “but if you were to meet an unfortunate end during this unwise excursion through no fault of my own, I would not be disappointed.”

Petrovitch took the opportunity to take his glasses off and rub them on the hem of his T-shirt. “When I look up *pizdets* in the dictionary, you know what I find?”

Miyamoto didn’t venture a reply.

“My picture. That’s what.” He hooked his glasses back over his ears and swung the door wide open. “Come on, lover-boy. You’re with me.”

16

They eyed the stream of refugees from the other side of the plate glass in the university foyer.

"This will complicate matters," said Miyamoto.

"No shit, Sherlock." Petrovitch tracked the movement of a woman pushing a huge chrome-ornamented pram piled high with plump plastic bin-bags. There was no evidence of a baby.

"They are all going one way. Not the direction we wish to go, either."

"Yeah. You stating the *yebani* obvious is going to get really old, really quick." Petrovitch held the door open to let one of the engineering lecturers out, wheeling a trolley stacked with taped-closed boxes. The noise poured in, the babble, the roar of people on the move. It reminded him of the old days, before the Long Night, when he was anonymous and the city sheltered him. "Let's go."

The only way they could make progress on the pavement was to press themselves against the walls, and even then, they had to stop for bulkier loads to pass by, or be swept backward and lose precious ground.

Petrovitch pulled Miyamoto into a doorway toward the top end of Exhibition Road.

"This is stupid."

Miyamoto crowded in next to him and still managed to take up half the space Petrovitch did despite being of similar height and build. "You wish to abandon your plan?"

"No. Just change it." He craned his neck over the moving crowd and eyed the traffic stop-starting down both sides of the white line. "Let's see how good you are at keeping up."

Petrovitch stepped out and let the press of bodies carry him away. But even as he shuffled back the way he'd come, he edged leftward toward the road. His foot fell off the curb, and he was with those traveling light, bags and backpacks only, squeezing in with the cars and vans, all heading south.

Then he sat on the bonnet of a car, and swung his legs up. Ignoring the furious driver hammering ineffectually on his horn, he walked up the windscreen to the roof and looked up the street toward Hyde Park.

The bigger vehicles were a problem. He couldn't mount a big van or a lorry, but there was a path through that relied on switching lanes and no small dose of luck.

The car beneath him jerked forward to close with the bumper of

the one in front, and Petrovitch crouched like a surfer to keep his balance.

Miyamoto appeared at his side, and thought Petrovitch needed steadying.

"Why don't you look out for yourself?" Petrovitch rose up and, with a grimace of unexpected pain, started running.

The bodywork sounded hollow under his feet as he skipped down to the boot end and over the gap to the next car. There was a mattress tied on top—people thought they might need the strangest things—and he bounced across it, using it as a springboard to the next car in the queue.

He didn't check behind him. Of course Miyamoto was there. The kid thought he was better than Petrovitch, more worthy than Petrovitch, and no part of him was going to let a *gaijin* show him up.

Petrovitch landed lightly, bracing himself with his extended fingertips. The woman behind the wheel stared at him. Every bit of space within the interior was overtaken with soft toys: it looked like she was being eaten alive by pastel-colored fur. It made the couple with the mattress look sane.

No time to wonder, though. He was up and over and confronted with his first flat-faced van. The street was supposed to be two-way traffic, but only an idiot would be going north at a time like this: both sides of the white line were stacked with a long queue of traffic, and the spaces between filled with people.

He judged the distance to the roof of the nearest car. Too far from a standing start, but neither did he want to climb down.

Miyamoto bounded by on the other side, not condescending to look back. He moved like a cat, all loose-limbed grace and confidence, as if he'd trained for this very moment.

Petrovitch growled under his breath and leaped, just as a shopping trolley rolled underneath. He used the handle as a stepping stone, planting his leading foot between the hands that steered it.

By the time he'd straightened up on the orange roof, Miyamoto was two vehicles ahead. Petrovitch set off in pursuit. Even when presented with another obstruction, in the shape of a lorry cab, he managed not to lose momentum. He pushed himself between the lines of cars, using the last of the bodywork to gain the first part of the next.

The lights at the junction cycled uselessly through the colors. Miyamoto got to them first, but only by the length of time it took Petrovitch to scramble over the last car and slide his feet to the tarmac.

"That was fun," he said. "Let's do it again."

Miyamoto raised an eyebrow above his dark glasses. "Are you

planning to travel like this all the way to… where?"

"West Ham. Ten k, that way." He pointed down to Hyde Park Corner. "But there are around five million people trying to cross the Thames all at once. We have to go north to go east."

"Across the park, then." Miyamoto touched the hilt of his sword, protruding over his left shoulder. But he cast a glance toward the Oshicora Tower, visible in the middle distance.

"We'll see what the Marylebone Road's like." With that, Petrovitch shouldered his way into the crossways traffic toward Hyde Park. Miyamoto followed, eyes fixed on Petrovitch's flapping coat.

The park was fenced off—boarded in like a construction site with painted wooden panels twice his height. In amongst the warning signs nailed to the outside were biohazard symbols in stark black and white. The gates themselves were chained and locked as well as covered in plastic sheeting.

Miyamoto drew his sword and slipped the blade between the gate and plastic. Then he drew his arm up. The black iron showed through as the plastic parted. The ornate curls and leaves had been designed for show, not security. Petrovitch jumped up, dug his boot in a gap and clambered up until he reached the top, using one of the gateposts as a handhold.

He turned and slid down the other side, to find Miyamoto staring at him through the bars.

"What?"

The corner of Miyamoto's mouth twisted. "You are better at this than I thought you would be."

"I can piss higher up the wall than you can, too. Get your *zhopu* over here."

Miyamoto resheathed his *katana* and scaled the gate, hand-over-hand, dropping lightly to the ground next to Petrovitch. He looked across the gray wasteland over the top of his shades.

Yellow diggers huddled together on the north side, and the first attempts at bulldozing the shanty-town had radiated from there, no more now than a sea of compacted mud. The Serpentine had been drained and dredged by a bucket-line, a crane parked over at the east end of the lake.

Apart from that, and the absence of the dying, it was as Petrovitch remembered it: low, ramshackle shelters, mostly collapsed, made from old, wind-torn bags, pieces of crates and metal spars, and the paths twisting between them in a drunkard's walk.

"Yeah. Follow the road straight across, and try not to contract cholera."

Petrovitch set off at a jog, giving the rats time to skitter out of his way. Some of the shacks had been constructed on the road through

the park, but the route was more or less direct.

The bridge across the black stink of the empty Serpentine was grim enough. The graded and flattened ground leading up to Lancaster Gate, with its caterpillar treadmarks and drifts of crushed white bones poking up out of the brown soil was worse.

The anonymous desperate had come to Hyde Park to lie down and die, and this was their legacy. It had enraged him while it had stood, and it retained its capacity to do so after its closure. Petrovitch considered it a selfish, stupid waste: pointless, pathetic, infantile.

It lent him more than enough energy to climb the gates on the other side of the park, vaulting the spear-shaped spikes decorating the top to land, knees bent, beside the Bayswater Road.

Miyamoto jumped down after him, and surveyed the scene. “This looks little better, Petrovitch-san.”

People were still streaming south, a formidable, moving obstacle to overcome. Outies had been reported as close as Hampstead Heath: those who were on the west side had options on where to go, but those on the east could only go one way. Tower Bridge was the lowest downstream crossing point, right in the heart of the city.

“If I was running this show, well, we wouldn’t have got to this point. But even now, someone should be in charge of traffic management.” Petrovitch pushed his glasses against his nose. “I suppose we should be grateful it hasn’t turned into a stampede.”

“Yet,” said Miyamoto. “There are reports of contact in Stratford.”

“Chyort.” Petrovitch dug in his pocket for the case that held his clip-ons. He fitted them over his glass lenses and fired up the rat.

[Moshi moshi.]

“Yeah. Need a route. There’s a barracks in West Ham Madeleine’s working out of. If you can monitor the MEA radio net, too—without letting them know you’re listening—and see if you can hear her, that’d be even better.”

“Who are you talking to?” asked Miyamoto.

“Voice-activated hatnav. With some additional, non-standard, plug-ins.”

Text started to roll out in front of his eyes: [I need some criteria: shortest, safest, fastest, or some defined mixture of those three parameters.]

“Make it the fastest.”

The AI materialized in front of the unseeing Miyamoto. [Any route, any method?]

“Yeah.”

[How are you at running along railway lines?]

“Oh, you’re joking.”

[No trains. No people. I am aware you have been promised that

before: this time will be different.] The avatar, looking through the cameras on the building opposite, sized up Miyamoto. [Who is this?]

Aware that a regular hatnav couldn't hold a conversation, let alone instigate one, Petrovitch tapped out his reply on the rat's screen: Miyamoto—one of Sonja's corporate *samurai.*

The AI's avatar circled Miyamoto, and said approvingly: [He looks competent.]

You wish, Petrovitch typed. Now get on with it. We haven't got time for this.

[I am—surprised is not the right word—bemused by humans' ability to believe two contradictory views at the same time. I will have to learn how this is possible.]

He knew he'd regret it, but he asked anyway, "What the *chyort* are you on about?"

[You refuse to say that you love your wife. Yet every action you take shows that you do.]

Miyamoto was becoming too interested in what Petrovitch was doing. He started to crane his neck to see what was being written, and Petrovitch snapped the rat shut before he could make out a single word.

The avatar smiled; Petrovitch hated that expression, because he knew the vast intellect behind the stupid floppy hair and studied innocence had just got one over on him, and it was perversely happy about it.

"Were you doing anything I need to know about?" Miyamoto leaned closer so that Petrovitch could make out his own reflection in the dark glasses.

"No."

The avatar strode into the crowd, turned and waved Petrovitch on. It made it look so that bodies that passed between them obscured his form: just a trick and a waste of processing time, but it was showing off.

Petrovitch put the rat back in his pocket. "We're off again."

"You have a way through this madness?"

"Yeah."

Following the avatar, Petrovitch elbowed his way across the road and into the warren of sidestreets. Most traffic was sticking to the main roads, guided by herd instinct and maps which were in meltdown themselves. The maze created by the tall town houses and short straight streets must have looked baffling and frightening to the average refugee, whose only concern was to get to a bridge before it was cut.

So for Petrovitch and Miyamoto, it was easier going as they worked their way, dancing and dodging, toward Paddington. They

had to cross Sussex Gardens, a rat-run from the Edgware Road that had turned into a solid mass of stalled cars and nervous people, but then they were back in the little streets in front of the station.

The avatar ran ahead, waited for them, then bounded away again, urging them on.

Praed Street was as bad as anything they'd found before. Two roads converged at the far end. It was a riot waiting to happen, and tempers were already rising as Petrovitch jumped up to a car roof and leaped across to the next.

A shout alerted him. He turned to see Miyamoto balanced on the car he'd just left. He'd drawn his sword and in one uninterrupted movement, he brought the singing edge of the blade to a halt a hair's width from a ruddy man's upturned snarling face, perfectly exposed beneath him.

"Gun," called Petrovitch.

Miyamoto reached to his waist and tossed the gun over the heads of the crowd. Petrovitch caught it, and trusting that eyes were turning toward him already, fired three shots into the air.

The crack of gunfire, amplified and echoed by the glass and brickwork, achieved a collective cringe. For a moment, everyone stopped, ducked, looked for cover.

In that moment, Petrovitch was gone again: car, car, big last jump that barreled into a wheeled suitcase and the person pulling it, tumble, roll, and run down the dark service road that ran beside the concourse.

Miyamoto took his chance, too. Naked sword in front of him, he followed. One, two, three, and off into the space created by the fallen man, before chasing away after Petrovitch's flapping coat-tails.

Behind them, the roar of shouts and screams built and spread, along with the panic and fear: Outies, in the central Metrozone. What order there had been evaporated. They left chaos in their wake.

17

Access to the railway line was rendered simple by the presence of a swathe of demolished masonry, steel and glass that angled northeast, southwest: the Chuo line, heading toward Shinjuku, in the mind of the New Machine Jihad. The lofted beams that had spanned the platforms of Paddington had been brought down, the roof laid low in a toothy jumble of monolithic slabs.

Petrovitch picked his way over the debris, trying to keep a steady pace. Miyamoto was rubble-running a little way off, gaining at times, falling behind at others. But always in the lead was the baggy-trousered avatar, untroubled by inconveniences like shifting surfaces, awkward distances and gnawing fatigue.

It paused on the edge of the shining rails that stretched unbroken in one direction, twisted and buried in the other, and looked back. It seemed to be enjoying itself at its meat-confined companions' expense.

Before Petrovitch could catch up, it was off again, running down the track, skipping and leaping. While seeing that the AI's evident pleasure at something so mundane as tracking a moving point through real-space gave him satisfaction, there was also an inherent problem with the thing being so insufferably smug.

"Petrovitch-san?" Miyamoto's forehead was slick with sweat, and his breath had a ragged tail to it that it didn't have before.

"Yeah?"

"This is the wrong way."

"Uh huh. It's quicker, though."

"How?"

"Up to the sidings at Oak Common. There's a line that crosses. Goes to Willesden Junction. From there, pick up a route all the way to Stratford. Within farting distance of West Ham." Petrovitch's boots crunched oily ballast. To his right was the raised section of the A40, choked with vehicles, swarming with foot traffic. He was moving much faster than they were, and he could feel their envious stares across the distance.

"It is further."

Petrovitch put his hand over his heart, where stitches and a patch of canned skin held the edges of the knife wound together. The turbine purred smoothly, pushing oxygen-rich blood around his body in a way the old one never had.

"Yeah. I'll leave you behind if I have to," he said. Just to show that he could, he increased his pace slightly, leaving the other man to either respond or give up.

Miyamoto drew level again.

"I cannot permit that. Miss Sonja would be most displeased with me."

And pleasing Miss Sonja was chief of his concerns.

They ran through one station, and still in the shadow of the flyover, approached the next.

[People on the track. They appear to be both drunk and armed with rudimentary weapons. They are fighting amongst themselves.]

A bead of salt-sweat tickled Petrovitch's cheek, and he wiped it away. The next station was just the other side of the two road bridges that spanned the track. Between them and it, figures limned in red moved between the shadows of massive concrete pillars in a slow, complicated dance.

"Company," said Petrovitch. He reached into his pocket and pulled out Miyamoto's—his now—gun. "Six of them. If we ignore them, they should ignore us."

The avatar was waiting for them this time: not that it had any need to do so. Its presence or otherwise was no indication as to where its attention was directed. It could be almost anywhere, though not yet everywhere.

That it was leaning against the graffiti-covered tunnel walls, arms folded, made it clear that it was watching carefully and wanting to learn.

They got closer, and the situation resolved itself: not as the AI had supposed, a drunken brawl between those too stupid to flee. Not quite.

There was alcohol, for certain, that added unwarranted bravado to the cocktail of fear and abandonment. None of the protagonists could be described as an adult, but one of the kids was markedly younger: he was dressed differently, acted differently, and from his barked warnings, spoke differently.

Five feral youths, street fashion and sharp blades stolen from kitchens and tool boxes: the other, who wore clothes that had been patched, handed down, remade with dust. His hair was sun-bleached, his skin dark by wind and weather. His knife was a long, thin, lethal spike, and his shoes—his shoes were soft, unshaped.

"He is…" said Miyamoto.

"I know," said Petrovitch. He slowed his run until he was walking, and raised his gun. "You lot. Get the *huy* out of here, if you know what's good for you."

The Metrozone kids, for so long unused to taking orders from anyone, let alone well-meant advice, stared at him.

"Trying to spoil our fun?" said one.

"Fine. I'll put a hundred on the Outie." Petrovitch nodded to the gray-brown teenager. "But die quickly. We're in a hurry."

“He won’t kill us, you wanker. He won’t even touch us.” The boldest city kid walked toward Petrovitch, swinging his little cook’s cleaver.

Petrovitch shot him in the foot, and the kid screamed like a girl. He hopped and shrieked and swore and cried, and Petrovitch felt almost sorry for him. It was a hard thing to take, to bluff and be found wanting.

There was a sudden scramble, even before the echo of the gunshot faded. Feet scrabbled over loose track ballast, and the kid with the blood seeping from the sole of his designer trainer frantically trying to keep up with the others who were leaving him behind.

“Go,” shouted Petrovitch, “you and your crew. You might make it across the Thames in time if you hurry.”

The avatar levered itself off the tunnel wall and gave Petrovitch a slow hand clap.

[Your capacity for turning each and every situation to your advantage never fails to surprise me.]

“Glad to be of service,” muttered Petrovitch. He looked the Outie kid up and down and turned the automatic flat to his palm. “Put the pig-sticker away, and we can trade.”

The boy had a sharp, lean expression. His gaze flicked from the tip of his long, thin blade to the dull gun-metal gray in Petrovitch’s hand.

“Trade?” he repeated, but the way he said it, it could have been one of the more industrial swear words.

“Yeah. I realize you might not have needed me, that you could have cut each and every one of them and sent them away like a whipped *sabaka,* but accidents happen. You slip, your knife hand gets slippery with blood, one of them thinks of throwing a rock at your head. One mistake, and they’re on you, carving away like you’re the Sunday roast. My way was quicker and a lot more certain.”

The boy weighed up his words, and sheathed the blade at his waist. “You go. I go.”

Petrovitch glanced around at Miyamoto, who stood poised, his hand on the hilt of his sword. “Relax, okay?”

“He is from the Outzone. He will kill you if he gets the chance.”

“I’d like to think their motives are a little more nuanced than that. Isn’t that right, kid?”

The boy’s hand was straying back toward his bayonet, and Petrovitch felt the need to raise the gun barrel slightly. Maybe he would try and stick him. There was a look in his eye that warned everyone who might look that he was used to extreme, casual violence.

“So, let’s talk trade.”

The boy spat on the ground.

"You don't trade in the Outzone?"

"Strong take. Weak give." He squinted at the gun. "Not weak. Not give."

"Petrovitch," said Miyamoto. "We do not have time for this."

"There's time if I say there is." He looked again at the boy. "You know what a gun is, what it can do?"

The boy nodded.

"I could make you tell me what I need to know, but I won't do that. Instead, you get to ask me one question, and in return, I get to ask one of you."

"Weak! You weak!" shrieked the boy. But he didn't attack.

"I have the gun. Come on, you're the scout, the path-finder: in me, you have someone who's able to answer almost anything you might possibly think of."

The boy listened to the city, testing whether anyone else was near. "What you? What him?"

Petrovitch frowned. "What me what? Our names?"

Shake.

"What we do?"

Shake.

"Where we come from?" It finally got a nod. "I'm Russian. From St. Petersburg. He's Japanese, except there's no Japan anymore."

"Rus. Moscow," said the boy.

"Moscow, yes." He wondered where the conversation was going.

"Japan. Tokyo." The boy put his fingers at the corners of his eyes and stretched them into slits.

Petrovitch laughed, and Miyamoto was indignant.

"Not London."

"No, not London. Neither of us were born here."

And that, in some way entirely obscure to Petrovitch, seemed to satisfy the Outie boy. "Talk."

He seized his chance. "How are you coordinating this attack? Are you one army, or lots of groups? Is there any one person in charge?"

The boy tugged his ragged fingernails through his matted hair. Perhaps he thought he was being asked to give away too much. "Why? You hated enemy."

Petrovitch snorted. "Yeah, that's us. I need to find my wife. The last I heard, she was in West Ham, which is on the other side of the city."

"West Ham know. Wife know not."

"I didn't expect you to."

"That is not what he means: he does not understand what a wife is," said Miyamoto. He stepped forward, doing what the boy had done

and listened to the city. It was unnatural, quiet. “His woman. He needs to find his woman.”

“A woman? Why?”

“Again I say,” said Miyamoto to Petrovitch, “we do not have time for this. Two decades of being Outzone has changed their language and culture so far that communication is impossible.”

“I want to know what we’re going to face out there. Is it a single army, or is it a rag-tag bunch of tribes who’d just as soon kill each other as kill us? Do they even have a plan? It’s important.” Petrovitch focused his attention on the boy. “Who’s your boss? Who’s the big man?”

“Fox,” said the boy. “He kill you, he kill you.” He pointed to each of them in turn.

“Yeah. He’ll probably kill you, too. Where is he?”

The boy pointed unerringly north.

“Waiting for you to come back and report, right? You going to tell him about us?”

“Why not?”

“Because we’re not interested in the same things. We’re not competing. He wants to take the city. I want to find my wife.”

“Fox not for city. Fox burn city. Burn all.”

“And there was me thinking that all he wanted to do was take in a West End show and do a bit of sightseeing.” Petrovitch rolled his eyes. “He’s welcome to burn whatever he wants, as long as it’s not me or mine. Though if he heads straight into the central zones from here, he’ll have to watch out for the tanks.”

“Tanks,” repeated the boy. “What tanks?”

“This Fox: older than us, right? One of the original Outies? He’ll know what a tank is,” he said with a sly smile. “And my colleague is right. We’re wasting time. Go on, back you go, wherever you came from.”

The boy—not much older than Petrovitch had been when he’d been running through the frozen streets—put his hand on his knife and started to draw it. Petrovitch raised his gun and aimed it straight at his face. The boy grinned.

“Not weak,” he said.

“No. Don’t confuse me with the rest of the sheep. I’m not like them.” Petrovitch waved the gun down the track. “Run.”

As they watched the boy scamper away, jumping from one side of the rail to the other and back, just because he could, Miyamoto growled deep in his throat.

“What did that achieve?”

“*Zatknis*: I need to do something else.” Petrovitch fetched out his rat. “You’re tracking him?”

[Trivial,] said the avatar.

"Okay. Tag him, and anyone he comes into contact with. Then tag their contacts, too. Build me a map."

"Your hatnav again?"

"Slightly more than that. My associate," said Petrovitch, and watched as text scrolled across his vision.

[I have been promoted, then. Co-equal with a biological entity. Yet the status of my citizenship remains in question.]

"That's…" he started. "Not now. Just tell me where the kid goes."

[He is passing under Ladbroke Grove. Road very busy, vehicular traffic stationary. No way through there. Now he is climbing the fence to access Canal Way. It is a dead end. He is cutting back east along the towpath. There is a narrow footbridge across to the north side beside the road bridge.]

"Okay." He closed the rat. "Got your breath back?"

"I would like for you," said Miyamoto, "to explain to me what it is you are doing."

"While we're moving." Petrovitch set off again, in the direction taken by the boy. When Miyamoto had caught up, he said. "Think of a virus. If being an Outie is a disease, and the kid is a carrier, everyone he talks to has to be an Outie too. And everyone they talk to. If they have any sort of organization, I'll know where most of them are in a couple of hours."

"Clever," conceded Miyamoto. "Unless they use phones, or radios."

"Which they don't, otherwise their scouts would be carrying them."

An explosion rumbled in the distance. To the north, a fresh pillar of black smoke rose into the sky to join all the others that punctuated the horizon.

[Petrol station. Willesden.]

"How, how is it possible, that they hope to win?"

"By stampeding millions of people straight at the forces who might have the *yajtza* to fight back. Since the roads are clogged with fleeing refugees and we're reduced to running along railway lines, I'd say it was working."

He pulled ahead again, running fast and free.

18

[You now have twenty kilometers to go, instead of the ten you started with.]

"You brought us this way." Petrovitch hawked up phlegm and spat it between his feet. He straightened, pressing his hands into the hollow of his back. He was standing in a shunting yard between two lines of empty, rusting rail-trucks, and was taking the opportunity to rest. "I assume there was a good reason."

[When you asked me to calculate travel time, this route was genuinely the quickest.] The avatar dug its hands in its pockets, something that it had seen Petrovitch do a hundred times before.

"I'm sensing a but."

[You are not as fit as you wish to believe. I can identify places—probably several places—for water and food, since you have neglected to bring any with you.]

"Yeah. I didn't figure on running halfway across the Metrozone when I got out of bed this morning." He unstuck his T-shirt from his armpits. "That sounded like a subject change: why is this no longer the best way to go?"

Petrovitch's vision switched from the side of a paint-peeled truck to a real-time map of the immediate area. To the north, near the end of the old M1, was a concentration of red spots like a blood rash, each point an Outie. There were more than he'd expected, and he was about to ask the AI for precise numbers when the map started to contract, revealing what lay beyond its original borders.

There was another clump near Wembley, and three large masses on and around the fringes of Hampstead Heath, bleeding into the surrounding streets. His perspective drew further back, and a ragged line of clots stretched all the way from Ruislip to Stoke Newington. Behind the broad front were arteries of color, fading away into occupied ground.

"Yobany stos."

[The picture is incomplete. There are more data points in the east of the Metrozone, but the groups there have not yet been in contact with the western Outies. Also, information is passed across the line much quicker than it is passed back.]

"So how many are there?"

[One hundred and sixteen thousand, eight hundred and forty-three. Based on current densities, I estimate the total number of Outies to be in the region of two hundred thousand.] The scrolling text paused, and the avatar had the grace to affect a look of apology. [Does

this qualify for the epithet *pizdets?*]

Petrovitch's heart span faster. His mouth was dry, and he took his breath in quick, shallow gasps. "Where the *huy* did they all come from?"

[The Outzone, initially. They may be recruiting as they advance, or they may just be that numerous. Whichever, it presents you with a considerable problem.] The avatar shrugged. It hadn't been wrong, rather it had had insufficient information. [The probability of you successfully using my original route to get to West Ham has decreased to marginal values. A tactical withdrawal is recommended.]

There was another railway line, close by, that cut south: it even had its own bridge across the Thames at Kew. Petrovitch could see it on the aerial map. It was inviting him to follow it.

He turned to face the east, down the line of the freight cars, taking in the burning sky as he span. Miyamoto had crouched down against a wheel, hands resting on the weed-strewn ballast, head bowed, hauling air. He sensed he was being watched.

"What?"

"There's a problem."

"Which is?" Miyamoto bared his clenched teeth.

"My associate reckons on a couple of hundred thousand Outies between us and where we want to go."

Miyamoto looked sharply up.

"Yeah," said Petrovich. "If you want to bug out, I'll understand. In fact, I think I'd prefer you to go. You're not exactly dressed for the occasion."

"What do you mean? What is wrong with what I am wearing?"

"You look like a *yebani* ninja! I suppose you could put on a hi-vis jacket to make yourself more obvious, but you've got 'chase me' written all over you."

"Whereas you, with your coat in ruins and your clothes unwashed for weeks…"

"Am a dead ringer for an Outie." Petrovitch flashed a feral grin. "Who would have guessed that poor dress sense and appalling personal hygiene could be a survival trait?"

"Two hundred thousand."

"At a rough guess. It could be more."

Miyamoto dragged himself upright and stalked over to Petrovitch until they were almost nose to nose.

"I should kill you myself and save them the trouble."

"What would Miss Sonja say then?"

"I would kill myself after dispatching you, so no explanation would be necessary. At least," he said, "I could go to my grave knowing that I have saved her from wasting her life fawning over an

idiot like you."

Petrovitch pointed over Miyamoto's shoulder. "The south is that way."

Miyamoto balled his fists in frustration. "Two hundred thousand enemies. How can you possibly believe you can avoid them all—and then find your wife?"

"Clearly I do, because otherwise I'd be giving up and going home."

"That is not what I meant. What reason could you have for this level of self-delusion?"

Petrovitch swung away. "The Outies are on the move again, and we're too exposed here. I'm not responsible for you, or what you do: stay, go, follow, leave. Up to you. You need to choose now, though." He shrugged, and added; "I'm still going to find Madeleine."

[Even though you don't love her.]

The corner of Petrovitch's mouth twitched, and the avatar acknowledged its line-crossing with an apologetic bow, followed by its sudden vanishing.

"I swore to protect you," said Miyamoto. His close-cropped hair bristled with undisguised fury.

"Not to me, you didn't. You have no obligations to me whatsoever."

Miyamoto's jaw clenched tight. "This is not about you."

"No, apparently not." Petrovitch watched the red dots slowly crawl like grains of falling sand through the narrow streets of Cricklewood. He turned once to orient himself, and started to jog down to the end of the row of wagons.

He reached the last car, checked his map, and made for the particular branch line he needed. He didn't turn around: he could hear the clatter of shifting ballast close behind him and, more telling, the hiss of whispered Japanese curses.

He didn't know whether he was glad of the company or not. Part of him, the ruthless, dispassionate side, was already thinking that since Miyamoto would sacrifice himself to save him, how best to use this one-shot weapon. The other part, the part that he would readily acknowledge as embarrassingly small, was merely grateful for the presence of another human being not psychologically conditioned to kill him on sight.

Then there was the question of his own motivation. He knew why Miyamoto was sticking with him. He knew why the Outies wanted to gut the city and hang it out to dry. Why was he doing what he was doing?

"Any sign of Madeleine?"

[There has been radio traffic on the MilNet. Several MEA units

are currently engaged with Outie fighters, and more are fortifying positions in front of the advance. I have plotted these forward units, and it is likely that your wife is with one of them. Evacuated casualties are logged, and her name does not appear.]

"How about the CIA?"

[Rendering detailed, real-time satellite data across several wavelengths and tracking all the Outies places serious demands on my resources.]

"It's important."

[I can appropriate more processing power if you ask me to. It will degrade the bandwidth available to other users.]

"I imagine anyone in the Metrozone is going to be too busy worrying about the Outies to notice a slow-down."

[I meant globally. Someone, somewhere will investigate, and if they are smart enough, they will find me.]

"Yeah. Okay. Do what you can." He was hemmed in either side by banks of greened earth. He looked up at the backs of the houses. At least when the time came, there wouldn't be a shortage of places to hide from the Outies.

Petrovitch turned his attention to the tunnel ahead, a dead space where the AI couldn't look. The nearest known Outies were three k to the north—Fox's group—but there could be others ahead of the front line, untagged, invisible.

Three hundred meters in the dark. At least it was straight, and the bright circle at the far end wouldn't be an oncoming train. He did look behind him now, and watched as the black-clad figure ran toward him, the man's motion a lot less loose and lithe than it had been.

"We have to go through here."

Miyamoto nodded, and he moved to the side of the tunnel, to better see if there was anyone silhouetted against the distant patch of sky. Petrovitch dodged to the other side, and kept his eyes on the shadow in front.

The line between light and dark got closer.

[The Outies are moving. Your paths will cross at Kilburn High Road, two kilometers ahead.]

"Show me."

A semi-transparent map flicked over his view of reality. Petrovitch frowned.

"That'll take them straight through the Paradise housing complex."

[Yes.]

"As much as I'd like to see the Outies and the Paradise militia fight to the death, having a front line right across our route sucks."

[There is another railway track, just to the north. It will put you

behind the Outie advance.]

"Yeah. We'll take it." Petrovitch slowed as he reached the tunnel exit, and called to Miyamoto. "Diversion."

He ran across the tracks to the far side, and down along the uneven line of high wooden fencing that separated railway from garden. He shoved at random panels, and one proved more rickety than the others.

He put his shoulder to it. Something gave, and he tried again. Wood splintered and nails creaked. Miyamoto lent his strength to the enterprise, and the panel cracked, coming free from one of its supporting posts.

Petrovitch braced his back against it, holding it aside, then twisted around the end once Miyamoto had slipped through. His coat caught on the protruding nails: the points pierced the leather and dug into his shoulder.

He hissed and tugged free, running his hand up under his T-shirt and coming away with a smear of dark blood.

"Chyort."

Miyamoto was already making his way along the concrete path to the back door, trying to look stealthy. Petrovitch shrugged his stinging shoulder, and stalked after him.

The door was wooden, with a single square of glass. The keys were on the edge of the sink, next to the stack of used crockery. Miyamoto took a step back to look up for another point of entry. Petrovitch stooped to collect a couple of house bricks from the stack by the shed, and when he was close enough, he threw one at the wide kitchen window.

The glass crashed inward, and shards of what remained fell under their own weight and broke on the sill. Miyamoto stared open-mouthed at him. Petrovitch growled and used the other brick to sweep away the jagged points still sticking out from the frame.

"Keep it simple, *raspizdyai.*"

He discarded the brick onto the scrubby lawn and shucked off his coat, throwing it across the sea of shattered glass. He hopped up, across the top of the taps and onto the floor. His footsteps crunched as he shook out his coat in a shower of glittering splinters.

Miyamoto was still outside. Petrovitch slid the keys into his hand and twisted the most likely one in the lock. It clicked, and he pushed at the handle.

"What kept you?"

"We are supposed to be tactical." Miyamoto barged through, banging the door into Petrovitch's shoulder and making him wince.

"Zhopa."

The AI interrupted him. There were new contacts, just two streets

away, a long, thin line of red markers making their way purposefully toward a road bridge across the railway line.

Petrovitch opened the fridge. The food was still cold, the light still came on. He grabbed the carton of orange juice, the plastic liter of milk and the slab of cheese, setting them on the kitchen table amidst the debris.

"The Outies are too near. Get yourself something, and we'll move when they've passed."

He twisted the top off the milk and drank straight from the bottle, half of it in one tilt.

"You… you are an animal. A pig."

Petrovitch wiped the milky mustache away with his sleeve—first checking there was no embedded glass—and looked over the top of his glasses at Miyamoto.

"Mne nasrat', chto ty dumaesh."

"Speak English."

"A rough translation, then: bite me." Instead, he bit at the cheese, tearing off the wrapper with his teeth and spitting out the plastic on the floor. "You don't have to watch."

He chewed, daring the other man to say anything. The cheese tasted much like the wrapping but, tasteless as it was, it had the fats he craved.

A creak came from upstairs. Petrovitch put down the cheese and the milk. The knife block, tucked away in the corner, was already missing the biggest, sharpest blade, and a quick glance at the drainer didn't find it.

He put his finger to his lips, and pointed at the ceiling. Miyamoto drew his *katana* with a soft steel ring and held it close across his body. Petrovitch chose the twenty-centimeter knife with the serrated edge from the block. He wrapped his hand with a tea towel before gripping the handle through the cloth.

Miyamoto opened the kitchen door at a rush. There was the front door—closed—and the stairs up next to it. He trod quietly across the thin carpet, keeping his eyes aimed at the staircase. Petrovitch held his knife hand low and tried to emulate the silent footsteps.

The man in black took each step slowly, testing his weight, then moving up. They got halfway, and the tread Petrovitch was on protested. In the quiet, it sounded like a whipcrack.

Miyamoto's whole body slumped sadly, but only long enough to convey just how disappointed he felt. He swarmed up the rest of the flight and in quick succession kicked the three doors that led off the landing. All three banged back against their stops.

He saw something, and darted into the bathroom toward the back of the house. Petrovitch was right behind him as he raised his sword

over his shoulder, about to slash through the drawn shower curtain that obscured the bathtub.

Petrovitch shouldered him out of the way, pushing him over the toilet and clattering against the cistern. The tip of the sword traced a line that started at neck height and finished at waist level, across most of the translucent curtain.

The material sagged and gaped to reveal a girl, as white as the cold tiles she had pressed her back against, kitchen knife clutched in her quivering hands.

Miyamoto leaped up with a shout and started to swing again. This time, Petrovitch stepped in front and blocked the sword arm with his own.

They were face to face, and if he hadn't been wearing glasses, Petrovitch would have tried a headbutt. "What the *huy* is the matter with you?" He put his free hand against Miyamoto's chest and held him away.

When he was certain Miyamoto wasn't going to attack again, Petrovitch pulled the curtain back. The girl had slipped down, and now crouched in one end of the tub, knifepoint still trembling at them. She was in her school uniform.

"Yeah. Look at the big, bad Outie hiding in the *yebani* bathroom." He dropped his knife and unwound the tea towel. "You can come out now."

19

Her name was Lucy. Finding that out took a good five minutes of coaxing. It took another five to get her out of the tub and still she wouldn't put the knife down.

"We're not going to hurt you, just don't do anything that'll attract the Outies, who," and Petrovitch consulted his map, "are at the end of the street."

He sat on the floor by the door, having shooed Miyamoto and his big sword out. The girl cowered in the space between the toilet and the sink.

"What if I scream?" she said.

"Then I imagine me and the Last Samurai will run for it, and you'll get picked up by the Outies. Now, I have no idea what they do with Inzoners when they catch them, but that mere fact—that no one has yet reported what happens—makes me think it won't be a Good Thing. How old are you?"

"F-fourteen."

"Yeah. I don't know how vivid your imagination is, but you probably wouldn't want to be in my head right now."

She shivered uncontrollably, and Petrovitch was as certain as he could be that she wouldn't make a sound over a squeak. "How come you're still here? Everyone else has gone south, and you should have been with them."

"M-my parents. They called me. Told me to stay here. Said they'd come and get me." Her fingers tightened around the knife hilt, forcing her knuckles white against the black of her uniform. "They're not, are they? Coming to get me, I mean."

"No. No, they're not." Petrovitch straightened his legs out, forcing his toes to point up. "I don't know what they were thinking: they should have told you to run. You should have run anyway."

"But they said."

"They got it wrong."

"You got here, didn't you?" Her chin lifted for the first time.

Petrovitch pushed his glasses against the bridge of his nose. "I'm not your mom or dad. I have a gun, a bodyguard, and a very good idea where every single Outie is. Unless your mom is Special Forces or your dad owns a helicopter, I'm the only friendly face you're going to see in a while."

"What am I going to do?" she said.

"I don't know," said Petrovitch. "You ran out of options about the time we turned up."

He started to get up, and even that little movement had her one leg in the bath again. He was stiff, especially his calves. He stretched them, one at a time, and shook each foot.

"Seriously. What am I going to do?"

"Lucy. I…" He sat down again, on the toilet seat next to her so that he wouldn't have to look at her. "I'm not here to rescue you. Miyamoto is not here to rescue you either—he has to come with me for reasons that are too complicated to go into now. I have to find my wife and warn her that the nice MEA intelligence officer we met yesterday is a CIA agent and therefore responsible for murdering one of the few friends I had and nearly killing me. Twice. We'll be going through Outzone-controlled streets pretty much all the way, and the odds are currently a hundred thousand to one." He took a deep breath. "Whatever mess you're in, I can't get you out of it."

She dropped the knife she held, and sobbed. Just the once. She walked with unsteady gait to the door and opened it. She stepped through, closed it quietly behind her, and left Petrovitch feeling like utter *govno*.

The Outies on his map were grouping at the north end of the bridge over the railway line. He guessed that they'd cross in a couple of minutes, and he'd then officially be in enemy territory. It was almost time to move out.

Lucy's knife was point-down in the curling cork tiles on the floor. Petrovitch plucked it out and turned it in his hand. Its lack of guard made it a weapon of last resort, but that was pretty much where he was. He wrapped it and the other he'd picked out of the knife block into the tea towel, and slid them into a coat pocket.

Then he went back downstairs to the kitchen, where Miyamoto was sipping water from a glass.

"We cannot take her with us," he said.

"I've explained that to her," said Petrovitch. He picked up the carton of warming orange juice and flipped the lid open. "Considering we're leaving her to certain death, or worse, I think she took it very well."

"You will never complete your mission with her. It is… unfortunate."

Petrovitch necked down half the juice. "Yeah."

"She is very young," noted Miyamoto.

"With no useful skills or knowledge. Her legs: did you see her legs?"

"Like two thin sticks."

"And her knees were like *yebani* knots on cotton." Petrovitch started opening cupboards, looking through them, closing the doors again as he moved around the kitchen. "She couldn't keep up."

“No. I cannot imagine she has run for anything other than a bus in her whole short life.” Miyamoto rose from his chair and refilled his glass.

The electricity died. The display on the microwave winked out, the fridge motor stopped purring, even the wall clock shuddered and was still. Domestic alarms screeched into life, every house, over the whole area, including the one they were in.

The noise was deafening, as it was designed to be—just the right frequency to drill into the skull.

Miyamoto put down his glass and stalked into the hallway. After a few moments, the cacophony inside the house was abruptly terminated. Outside, the noise carried on, but it was now bearable.

As he came back into the kitchen, he sheathed his sword. “They have cut the power.”

“Taken out the substation, I guess.” Petrovitch had found some empty drinks bottles: he was now trying to match lids to necks. “They’re right outside.”

“What are they doing?”

Petrovitch squinted at his glasses. “Just looking around, I hope. No, there’s a car coming.”

He left the bottles and went back upstairs. Lucy’s bedroom had her name on it in colored plastic letters. He eased into her room and crouched down by the window. She was lying on her bed, face down in the pink pillow, perfectly still until she heard the door shoosh close.

She looked up with red-rimmed eyes, and Petrovitch pressed his finger to his lips. He peered over the window ledge, through the translucent net, to the street below.

The car—red, low, fast, with tinted glass and shiny alloy wheels—accelerated toward the Outies in the road. To start with, it looked like they didn’t understand what was happening. They didn’t step back, and even though there was a line of cars parked either side of the road, they didn’t try to stand behind one of them, or any of the lamp posts. Neither did they aim any of their few guns, ranging from a couple of ancient revolvers through several shotguns to one modern assault rifle.

The red car’s engine roared. The front wing clipped one of the stationary vehicles, and it swerved violently across the white line, flicking the wing mirror of another into the sky.

The Outie in the very middle of the road was carrying a steel pole as tall as he was. He raised it in his dusty hand and held it like a javelin, and waited. The other Outies pulled away, unhurried, strolling in their soft, animal-skin-shod feet.

The car was almost on him, and he was perfectly still.

Then he jumped as if he had springs in his heels. He made no

effort to throw the tube, but it fell, still perfectly horizontal, into the path of the oncoming windscreen.

It went through. The windscreen crazed across its whole width, and the pole kept on coming out the back window, where it came to rest, half-in, half-out. With a screech of tires and two successive bangs, the car ended up sideways, wedged between the parked cars. Smoke whispered from the crushed bonnet, and a fine white powder was blowing from the shattered interior. Wailing car alarms now added to the noise.

The Outie man landed on the tarmac, crouching, reaching for the knife at his belt. He straightened up, holding his arm high, and the rest of them surrounded the crashed car.

The driver's door popped open. A figure fell out into the road, at the man's feet. White dust swirled away, and a deflating airbag shriveled at the dashboard. The man reached down, took the driver by the throat and hauled him up.

It looked like a man, though there was so much blood on his face it was difficult to tell if he was young or old. Not that it mattered much, because in the next second, the Outie had stabbed him—a hard punch to the left side of the neck that made the tip of the blade come out the right. He held the blade still while his victim jerked and clawed, briefly.

Then he dragged it out, almost severing the head and leaving the tattered mess where it fell.

The other Outies made no attempt to intervene, join in, talk to each other—anything. They watched, passively, as the man squatted on his haunches to inspect the inside of the car.

He inclined his head, and with his free hand, beckoned.

The passenger door flew open, and a girl with a tight blonde ponytail burst out. She stumbled after the first few frantic steps, and sprawled onto the road. The Outie threw himself across the crumpled metal of the bonnet, rolled and landed square in the girl's back just as she tried to rise.

Lucy was standing behind Petrovitch, staring down at her quiet suburban street, where nothing much of anything ever happened.

Petrovitch marched her back to the bed and sat her down, out of eyeshot. He could hear screaming over the alarms, and he wished he couldn't. He scratched at his chin, then flicked his glasses off and pinched the bridge of his nose.

When he opened his eyes, he was looking at her feet.

"Do you own a pair of trainers?"

She was wearing black shoes with a wedge heel. Must have been a good school: black shoes, black tights, black skirt, white shirt, blazer with a crest on the pocket. A tie, for pity's sake.

“Y-yes.” She pointed at her wardrobe. She cringed as a long, drawn-out cry from outside ended in a low, rasping moan.

“Put them on,” said Petrovitch.

Her blurred outline nodded. She took the two steps across the room, and retrieved the whitest pair of trainers he’d ever seen.

“Chyort.” He pushed his glasses back onto his face. The red dots that represented the group outside were drifting back toward the bridge, and he checked out of the window to make sure. He could see their backs as they wandered up the road.

Lucy already had her trainers on, and was standing by the door. She opened her mouth to say something, and Petrovitch pre-empted her.

“Do not,” he said, “now or ever, thank me. Okay?”

“But…”

“Just don’t.” He pushed past her and descended to the kitchen. He filled three small bottles with water, threw one to Miyamoto, and one to Lucy. She managed to catch it.

Miyamoto stared at the girl, and then at Petrovitch. He narrowed his eyes.

“You said.”

“Past’ zabej! We have five minutes at most to make it to the next line north.” He reached into his coat pocket for Lucy’s knife. He held it out to her, handle first. She hesitated, and Petrovitch growled. “You know what to do with it? Yes?”

“Yes.” She took it from him, and wondered where to put it. She ended up holding the waistband of her pleated skirt out, and sliding the flat of the blade against her hip.

“We have to go. Front door.”

They moved down the hall. Petrovitch turned the latch and opened the door. The sound of bleeping and blaring and ringing crowded in. He took a deep breath and started to run.

The Outies had gone right. They went left, away from the crash scene and the spreading pools of blood, hunched over so that the tops of their heads were no higher than the tops of the cars.

They crossed the road, quickly, skittering like blown leaves, then turned up a side street. Petrovitch straightened up, glanced behind. Lucy was next, her stupidly obvious footwear flashing like the warning signals of a startled deer. Miyamoto was almost on her heels, close enough to put his hand in the small of her back and push her along if he’d wanted to.

The road swung around toward the station. The nearest Outies were at the top of Willesden Green, coming down the hill toward them. Less than a kilometer away. Hardly any distance at all.

Using the map as a guide, they darted into a private car park that

bounded the railway cutting. A high fence of concrete panels blocked their path. Petrovitch crouched down by the wall and cupped his hands between his knees.

Again, Lucy froze, not knowing what to do. Miyamoto jogged past her and, without breaking step, placed his foot in Petrovitch's hands.

He was boosted to the top of the wall, and as deftly as any gymnast threw one leg over so that he straddled it.

"Run," said Petrovitch, "jump." Miyamoto lowered his hand for her.

She took two steps back, then sprinted. She seemed to have her eyes mostly closed, but managed to leap at the right moment.

Miyamoto caught her forearm and, with a face screwed up with effort, pulled her the rest of the way. She wobbled briefly, then dropped down the other side.

Petrovitch took a run-up himself, and planted his feet against the rough concrete, hanging from Miyamoto's wrist. They looked at each other, briefly, and Petrovitch found that he was completely unable to read his expression.

"Sorry," said Petrovitch. "We had to bring her."

"You had to bring her, you mean."

"Yeah, that's precisely what I mean."

Petrovitch put one elbow over the top of the wall, and let go of Miyamoto to get the other across. He hauled himself painfully up, then measured the drop on the other side. Lucy was looking up at him from the rough grasses of the embankment, swigging from her bottle. She was already dirty and disheveled, her tights torn through at the knees.

He rolled his body, and hung by his fingertips. Then he fell, picked himself up, and batted his coat with his hands.

Lucy asked him. "What do I call you?"

"Whatever you want. Sam, I suppose."

Miyamoto released himself from his perch and landed softly beside them. "Which way?"

Petrovitch pointed northeast, and Miyamoto set off to join the rails without another word.

"He doesn't want me here, does he?"

"It doesn't matter what he thinks." Petrovitch checked all his belongings. The rat was still safely in one pocket, the gun and knife in another, the bottle in a third. "All that matters now is that you stay with me."

20

Fresh text scrolled across his eyeline as he jogged along. They were crossing over a major road on a gray-painted bridge, but its sides were high, and topped with even higher mesh, in an attempt to prevent thrown objects landing on the tracks.

There were Outies beneath, but they couldn't see him. Knowing they were there made his heart turn a little faster, made him place his feet a little more carefully.

He paid attention to the words bouncing in front of him.

[Reuters: Nobel nominee Dr. Epiphany Ekanobi arrested attempting illegal border crossing to Mexico from U.S. Dept for Homeland Security source states Ekanobi "credible terrorist threat."]

"Chyort vozmi," he growled.

[She is being held at the local sheriff's office until personnel arrive from Los Angeles.]

Petrovitch felt his fists clench involuntarily. "If they so much as harm a single hair on her head, I'll…"

[What possible damage can you do to them?]

"Crash their currency. Wipe their records. Deny them their satellites. Dangle them over the information abyss and threaten to drop them."

[While I am likely to be able to do these things, I would need persuading before I was willing. Furthermore, I am currently using some of their assets to help you: the NSA are providing your satellite imagery.]

"I didn't mean now: we're busy. Later will do fine."

[Regarding the digital map: I cannot sustain it beyond 1656 GMT. Unless all the Outies remain perfectly still over the fifteen minutes between one viewing platform setting over the horizon and the next rising sufficiently high to take over, all data will be lost.]. It added helpfully, [Just over five hours.]

"I could crawl on my hands and knees and still make it to West Ham in four." He turned, running backward for a few steps, to place his finger to his lips and point downward at the road.

[It is unfortunate that Dr. Ekanobi has been captured. But I have identified the MEA unit your wife is attached to: she is north of West Ham, on the North Circular. They have taken up a defensive position on a raised section of road.]

"But won't they end up completely surrounded?"

[There is another MEA unit engaged in a fighting retreat toward Woolwich. Their tactics appear to be to use one group as a diversion

while the other escapes, more or less intact, along with the many thousands of refugees ahead of them.]

"So she's bait."

[Yes.]

"Does it look like there's a plan to get them out?"

[No.]

"I'm not abandoning her."

[Your worth to human civilization is far greater than the meaningless sacrifice of your life for a woman you cannot say you love. If you try to save her, you will die.]

"Yeah. You know this for sure?"

[The girl Lucy will die too.]

"*Zatknis' na hui.* There'll be a way. I just have to think of it."

The embankment graded out and for a few short paces they were level with houses. They swept under a vast concrete structure that carried trains into Finchley Road, and kept angling down. The ground either side and in front rose up, and the tracks multiplied and split, left and right: after they passed through Finchley station on separate platforms, each bundle of rails went under the hill of Hampstead Heath. No short tunnel this time.

Petrovitch slowed and let the others catch up. Miyamoto was working hard, enough to make him reluctant to speak—and Petrovitch was glad for that, since he was getting more than enough grief off the AI. Lucy looked ready to drop, though. She was pale, shaky, and it looked like it hurt every time she tried to breathe.

Perhaps they could walk the next kilometer as it was entirely underground.

"We go in here," he started to say, but his words were lost in the shrill whistle of artillery.

The shells came from the south, howled overhead and exploded with a full-throated roar a few streets away. Debris lifted into the air, and pulverized dust began to drift in grubby clouds.

[EDF tanks in Primrose Hill. They seem confident that there are no civilians left in the target area.]

A second volley of gunfire blossomed in red and black down the Finchley Road. Glass shattered and walls fell, and the ground shook. Slates and tiles span away, and started to hit the railway track like spinning plates, exploding as they crashed down. The sound of the shells leaving the guns was a distant and belated afterthought.

"Run."

Petrovitch reached forward and grabbed Lucy's hand, and he had to drag her, her exhausted legs unable to respond.

The barrage continued, getting closer, but they were safe in the tunnel's mouth and picking their way further in. Gritty soot rained

down on their heads with every concussion, and the air itself stiffened with every explosion.

Petrovitch fumbled in his pocket for the rat, his other arm fighting the losing battle to keep the schoolgirl upright. He ended up dumping her on her backside and leaning her against his legs while he flipped the case open and dialed the screen's brightness up to maximom.

The pearl light illuminated the peaky whiteness of Lucy's face, the oily darkness of the Victorian brickwork, and his own dusty glasses. Miyamoto stood watching the detritus accumulate across the tracks outside, and then the station took a direct hit.

The blast wave made them all duck down and cover their heads, and the roil of smoke that followed had its own distinctive taste. It smelled of war.

Petrovitch held the rat up, jerked Lucy to her feet and pushed her further in. The tunnel entrance was a hazy dot when they stopped again.

"We should be all right here," he said.

Miyamoto's eyes blinked in the soft glow. "And if the tunnel collapses?"

"We're screwed. But it stood up to the Luftwaffe: a few tank rounds aren't going to make a difference." Petrovitch sat down next to Lucy. "You okay?"

She had scrunched her body up and was shivering uncontrollably. "Ohgodohgodohgod," she was whispering, while her fingers writhed like dirty worms.

"Yeah, you'll get used to it." She'd lost her water bottle, and Petrovitch pressed his on her. "You might think that you were safer where you were, but that's just an illusion. We're doing fine. You're doing fine. Better than I expected, anyway."

She said something that he couldn't quite catch.

"Say again?" He leaned in close.

"N-not bad f-for a girl." She looked out at him under her fringe.

"Not bad at all." He patted her shoulder awkwardly, not knowing what else to say. He felt he ought to try. "I will get you out of this: I promise."

Lucy fixed him with her wide eyes that glowed in the light of the rat's screen. "Y-you're just saying that." Her whole body spasmed, and she clutched her knees tighter.

"I've done this before. I didn't lose anyone then. I don't intend to now."

She nodded. "But… outside."

"Yeah. We'll have to do something about that. The Outies we can deal with, but a stray artillery round will really ruin our day."

Miyamoto reached over his back and drew his sword with a singing ring. “The European Defense Force are targeting Outie concentrations, but I do not believe that it will stop the inevitable loss of the northern Metrozone.”

Petrovitch tapped his rat. He’d lost the satellite connection—too much soil and rock between him and the open sky. “It’s not inevitable. Not anymore.”

“Explain.”

“The Outie advance relied on the wave of refugees ahead of it overwhelming the defenders’ capacity to cope. As long as they kept right up to the heels of the last fleeing Metrozoner, they were going to win. But they’ve fallen behind. They’ve underestimated just how fast a population can shift when the *govno* hits the fan. If the EDF can get enough troops on the ground to hold a line, set up enough pinch-points to funnel the Outies into the killing grounds, then not waver even when they’re down to their last bullet…” Petrovitch cocked his ear to the steady crump of explosions echoing down the tunnel. “I could win it.”

“Your capacity for self-aggrandisement never fails to astound me.” Miyamoto snorted. “You are not a god. You are not a general. You are a weak, venal, delusional street child who never grew up.”

Petrovitch played his tongue across his teeth for the few moments it took his anger to rise and then subside. “I don’t see anyone else around here who’s got a bunch of equations named after them.” He pretended to search the shadows for the ghosts of Schrödinger, Fermi and Heisenberg. “And I’m the only one who bought a *yebani* torch! So why don’t you just watch and learn?”

He levered himself to his feet, and crooked his hand under Lucy’s armpit. She looked up at him.

“Now?”

“Yeah. Sorry.” He pulled her up and held on while she steadied herself.

“I’m ready,” she said, though her legs could barely support her. The darkness of the tunnel bore down on her, but she struggled and stood tall. “Definitely ready.”

They walked down the center of the two tracks, on the rise of ballast that rattled and clattered when they kicked it, making sharp distinct sounds compared with the dull bass boom that reverberated around them. Without his map, Petrovitch was guessing they were halfway, and that they really ought to be able to see the far end sometime soon.

They didn’t: he couldn’t remember there being a curve that might block their view, and he held the little screen further out to one side, so as not to ruin his night sight.

There were lights ahead. Several, but none of them were shards of daylight.

"Chyort." He snapped the rat shut and stayed perfectly still. Lucy, dogging his heels, stumbled into his outstretched arm and gave a little squeak of fear.

He watched and listened; he didn't have a heartbeat to sound in his ears. Miyamoto seemed to have vanished, but he could hear the girl's panting breaths off to his left. Above those slight vibrations, above the sub-sonic trembling of exploding shells, was a soft susurration of voices. The lights were still, though occasionally one seemed to flicker, as if a body occluded it.

Lucy was still in contact with his arm. He guessed at where her hand would be and, as silently as he could, walked her to the wall. He put her hand on it, and whispered into her hair, "Stay still."

He left her there, and walked on, his own fingertips trailing the damp, crumbling tunnel side. He slipped the rat into a pocket, and filled that hand with his gun.

The lights grew and brightened. He could make out shape and form, and he frowned. There was a train in the tunnel, and there were people on that train. Petrovitch rode his luck, and loped up to the rear buffers.

It was a commuter train, stalled due to the power cut. The passengers ought to be long gone, though. The weak blue-white light just about made it through the oily dusty patina of the windows of the carriages, but no further. He pressed his ear to the metalwork. The buzzing, rumbling voices inside were indistinct, and he gained nothing but another smear of dirt.

Some of the train doors were open; the footplate was chest height, and Petrovitch stealthily eased himself aboard, crawling across the floor at the entrance until he could swing his legs up and in. He peered over the bottom of the internal door, through the smeary glass.

He could count about a dozen people, and supposed there might be a dozen more. Someone was standing in the aisle, their back to him, and he appeared to be wearing a dressing gown. A checkered, brown dressing gown, with a plaited cord tied around the waist.

Petrovitch stood up, and found the door handle. His first attempt at opening it failed, because he didn't appreciate that it slid to one side and wasn't hinged.

By the time he finally made a gap wide enough to squeeze through, most of the occupants of the train were standing, all were staring, and a hushed, pregnant silence had descended over them.

"Hey," said Petrovitch.

A man in a white coat pushed past the dressing-gown wearer—though almost everyone was in some form of nightwear—and

brandished a syringe.

"No closer," he warned, then ruined the effect by adding, "please."

Petrovitch held up the gun in his hand. "I don't need to get closer. Hang on." He leaned to one side, trying to see the far end of the carriage. "Miyamoto? Miyamoto?"

Heads turned, and there was a terse "What?"

"Put the *yebani* sword away, grab one of those lantern things and go and get Lucy."

Miyamoto stepped out of the shadows and sheathed his blade. He snatched one of the little shining globes off the table between two elderly women and retraced his steps back into the darkness, carrying the light with him.

Petrovitch started to put the gun away, then thought better of it. "You first." He didn't want a needlestick, accidental or otherwise, and he could guarantee that anything inside the syringe wasn't going to be good for him.

The man in the white coat crouched down and put the hypodermic on the floor, and Petrovitch waved them all back while he retrieved it. The liquid inside was clear, with tiny crystalline bubbles clinging to the meniscus.

He put it up on the luggage rack out of harm's way. Everyone was waiting for something, anything, to happen.

Petrovitch lowered his gun, dangling it in his hand. The white coat had an ID badge clipped to the pen-filled breast pocket. He couldn't make out the name in the gloom, and assumed the man's profession. "What the *chyort* are you all doing here?"

"You're not," said the doctor, "you're not one of them?"

"Despite appearances to the contrary, no. You shouldn't be here. You should be south."

"This," and he balled his fists in evident frustration, "this is as far as we could get."

His patients—his charges—nodded sadly.

"We had a bus," said a man with the first flush of white stubble patterning his jowls; "we had one and we got it took off us. Turfed us out in the street, they did."

Another shrugged. "What did they expect us to do? Walk?"

Petrovitch grabbed the doctor by the collar and dragged him away toward the door.

"*Yobany stos,* man. Walking would have been better, whatever speed they could have managed. You could have made it to the Thames by now."

"I've got patients with emphysema, angina, diabetes, hip replacements, open leg ulcers, cataracts, glaucoma. I had to make a

decision: yes, a couple of them could have made it. But we decided to stay together." The doctor narrowed his eyes. "Don't I know you?"

"Yeah, I'm a *yebani* celebrity."

"The sweary physics guy on the news. But…" He scratched his ear hard. "Look, I don't care why you're here. What are our chances?"

Petrovitch saw a light appear at the far end of the carriage, and Lucy stumble along the aisle toward them.

"The Outie advance has gone over your heads. We're Outzone now, and everything that means."

"Then what's that pounding?"

"EDF artillery. Too little, too late. We're facing an army you can measure in the hundreds of thousands, and no one's seemed to realize that a few well-placed HE rounds isn't going to make a blind bit of difference. Unless I can persuade them otherwise, the EDF will hold on as long as they can, then they and MEA will blow the bridges and abandon the north. That means you, and everyone else left in it."

The doctor's face twitched.

Petrovitch dropped his gun in his pocket and moved back to accommodate Lucy. "Whichever way you look at it, you're pretty much hosed. You're in the middle of occupied territory. Even if the Outies don't come and find you, you're going to have to leave here eventually. Unless you're intending to euthanize the lot of them."

When the idea wasn't immediately rejected out of hand, Petrovitch felt himself flush cold.

"Tell me you didn't bring them down here to die."

"Then what," said the doctor, tight-lipped, "do you suggest I do?"

"What?" said Lucy, face turning from one man to the other. "What's going on?"

"I," said Petrovitch, and swallowed. He looked at the lined, tired faces and the rheumy eyes reflected in the cold blue light. "No. I've just about had it. *Huy tebe v'zhopu!* This has gone on long enough. We're turning into a bunch of *yebani* savages, and it's about time someone stood up, extended their middle finger and screamed *'Zhri govno i zdohni!'* "

"Sam," said Lucy, with an embarrassed smile, "actually, you are screaming whatever it is."

"Good." He gathered up the front of the doctor's white coat in his tightening hand and pulled him forward until they were nose to nose. "You will not—and I'll repeat that—not hurt a single one of these people. Do you understand me? Even if you kill yourself afterward, I will find some way to drag you back to life and make you suffer like no one has ever suffered before."

Petrovitch let go and wiped his hand free of any contagion. Again, all eyes were on him, and he snorted.

“Miyamoto?” he called. He could see the man’s shoulders slump in the shadows. “Yeah, you’re with me. We’re going to find some sky. And then,” he muttered so that only Lucy could really hear, “I’m going to throw myself into the open gates of hell and damn them to do their worst.”

He spun around, his ragged coat-tails flying in streamers behind him, and stalked away back out into the darkness.

21

What is it that you are intending to do?"

Petrovitch stamped toward the tunnel's exit and refused to answer.

"You must tell me." Miyamoto caught him up, put a hand on his shoulder and spun him around. "What madness affects you now?"

"I," said Petrovitch, "don't have to tell you anything. Anything at all. Your job is to keep me alive. That's it. My job seems to be considerably more complicated, so why don't you shut up and let me get on with it?"

When he made to turn away again, Miyamoto could barely restrain himself.

"No. No: you cannot do this. If you die—when you die—I will be blamed. Miss Sonja will send me away. If I am to keep you safe, you must reconsider this madness." He could think of nothing else to say. "I beg you."

Petrovitch stood with his back to him. "You're putting too much store in a relationship that's a figment of your imagination. Sonja is using your devotion to her like a queen would a knight. Wake up, man! She doesn't want you."

"No, she wants you."

The corner of Petrovich's mouth twisted into a grimace. "She can't have me. I'm promised to another."

"Your wife will not survive this. You know that. And when she is gone…" Miyamoto's voice finished in a strangled grunt of frustration and bitterness.

"If you say that again, I will shoot you dead and damn the consequences." Petrovitch brought his arm up straight and pointed the gun at Miyamoto's head. "We are going to fight, and we are going to win. Got that?"

"Truly, you are insane."

"What's it all for, then? What is it I'm meant to do? What's the point of being the smartest guy I know if I don't use those smarts to do something?" Petrovitch lowered the gun.

"We have gone in a full circle," said Miyamoto. "What do you propose to do that will save not just Lucy, and those elders, but your wife too?"

"I'm going to use the One Ring, even though I might have left it too late: I might not have enough time, or enough people, or enough anythings." He put the gun away and got out the rat. There was still no connection. "We have to get closer to daylight."

Slowly, the tunnel grew brighter, and there was a slouching youth waiting for him in the distance, standing between the rails, tapping his foot.

"Hey."

[What happened? I expected you to be out of contact for no more than three minutes.]

"There were people in the tunnel. Hospital patients, and a doctor who's going to give them all a lethal injection whether the Outies come for them or not."

[Why does this concern you? You knew when you set out to find Madeleine that you would find those left behind. You can save one, perhaps. You cannot save them all.]

"Yeah, we'll see about that." He pulled the hem of his coat up. He could feel a stiff wire inside the lining, coiled like a snake, and he passed the material through his fingers until he came to a tear. He dug out the end of the cable Sonja had sent with Miyamoto, and threaded it all through the gap. "I'd convinced myself I didn't care about anyone, and perhaps getting married would make me care. Which was why, I suppose, I wanted to cross the Metrozone against the biggest flow of refugees since Japan sank: just to show I cared about another human being." He contemplated the end of the cable, the plastic plug with its connectors that went into the rat.

[And you find that you do not?]

"The opposite: I've found that I do. I care about everyone." Petrovitch clicked the cable into place. At its other end was a silver jack, long and thin and ridged, designed to lock into its socket with a half-turn. "So here's the deal. You get your citizenship. I get my wife."

[With you, Samuil Petrovitch, there is always a price to pay. What will this cost me?]

"Do you trust me?"

[No] it answered baldly. The avatar walked in a circle across the tracks, head bowed. [You are meat. You get tired, hungry, weak, scared. You have a flexible notion of morality. I know you will change your mind, not once, not twice, but a hundred times before this is over. You do not tell me the cost because I know the cost is everything.]

"Do you trust me?" he asked again.

[No. Your motives are hidden to me. Your thought processes are opaque. You are ruled by your passions. How can I possibly trust you when so much is in the balance? If I lose, I lose my very existence.]

"I don't want anyone to say I forced you. I don't want you to think that, either. This—this is me. It's time to risk everything on a throw of the dice. But I can load those dice in our favor. I can manipulate chance, defy fate, do the impossible." Petrovitch held up

the jack in front of his face. The avatar couldn't see it, couldn't possibly know what he was planning. The AI wasn't stupid, but it lacked imagination. "Do you," Petrovitch said once last time, a smile on his lips, "do you trust me?"

It stopped walking, and raised its face to the light at the end of the tunnel. [I have no reason to do so, except this: it is you who is asking. What choice do you leave me?]

"Good enough for me." He felt around the back of his head and started to push the jack home.

Miyamoto tried to stop him, but he'd realized too late what Petrovitch was up to. He was too far away to do anything. Petrovitch saw him lunge toward him, hands outstretched, but the jack was in and twisted.

Everything went white.

He was blind and senseless, but he expected that. It would take a few moments for the rat to recognize that there was new hardware installed, and then fire up the right program—the Sorensons' mitigator program—to mediate the virtual experience for him, fitting like a filter between meat and metal. It had been a simple matter to turn the interface around, so that input and output could be reversed.

Lines. He could see lines, as thin as wires. Colored circles and shapes paraded around him, blurred at first, with too much blue, but there was some feedback from his optical center and they snapped into focus, becoming warmer and redder.

His skin ran through heat and cold, dull and sharp, feather-light pressure and painful grip. His hearing was tested for stereo. The five tastes were applied to his tongue, and a basic array of aromas assaulted his nose.

Petrovitch blinked, slowly. Dark, light. He was somewhere inside the rat, in a machine that wasn't a digitized world but a workaday handheld computer. Perhaps the mitigator couldn't cope with the unexpected. Perhaps he needed to code a solution for himself, out of nothing.

He voiced a keyboard into existence, scrawled some basic commands glowing into the air, and created an interface: pull-down menus that worked like blinds, a window for the outside world, a schematic for connections outside of the rat.

The avatar watched him intently over his shoulder.

"Hey. Almost done," said Petrovitch.

[You could have told me.]

"Then it wouldn't have been a surprise." His body was as it had been in VirtualJapan: a chrome mannequin, featureless and naked. Oshicora had given him form and substance then, but right now he was busy. "We have work to do."

[Am I going to have to reveal my presence to the world?] The AI looked pensive.

"Yeah. If everything goes right, it won't matter. If everything goes wrong, it won't matter either. Ready?"

[What do you want me to do?]

Petrovitch tried to push his glasses up his nose. They weren't there. Dissatisfied, he drew a sandtable with his finger, and populated it with all the information he could gather on the Metrozone. Layers upon layers of info: topography, architecture, utilities, transport, cameras, people, and more: the positions of troops, artillery pieces, command-and-control centers. Still more, the Outies, the breaches in the M25 cordon where they'd flooded through, the abandoned towns of the Outzone.

"Your predecessor unconsciously attacked a city and brought it to its knees. It destroyed buildings and killed using the city's own automatic systems and giant robots it built in co-opted factories. This time, it's going to be different, because I'm going to show you how to do it properly."

The AI pondered the living map. [To control all this will take more processing capacity than I have.]

"We have to code it. Distribute our agents, give them commands and let them carry them out. We want autonomous cars? We write the script, broadcast it, modify it on the fly. We want to take over the EDF forces? Place a diversion between the units and the generals. Fake it so that the top brass see what they think they should be seeing, while we direct the troops to do what we want them to do. We take the resources we need to do the job. We'll give them back later. Do it. Do it now."

The AI's avatar blurred and became pixelated as its attention turned elsewhere. Petrovitch called Sonja.

"You did it, then," she said.

"I decided it was time."

"You could make that decision yourself, of course." She brushed her fringe aside and stared at his silvery outline. "What else have you done without talking to me?"

"I got the AI up and running again. It's been online for three, four months now. It's a smart kid. Your dad would be proud."

"Oh, Sam. Is Miyamoto with you?"

"Yes. In real-space."

"I'm going to have to order him to kill you. And he'll do it, too."

"I know. Gladly, I expect. Where are you?"

She moved to one side to show the park at the top of her tower. "I told you I wouldn't leave."

"The Outies are almost on the northern edge of Regent's Park."

“Yes. I can hear them,” she said. “There are too many of them for the EDF to hold back, and I suppose it won’t be long before they’re here. But I’m ready for them, Sam. I was serious when I said I was going to protect my father’s legacy.”

“Were you serious enough to arm as many of your workgangs as you could?”

When she didn’t answer him, he knew.

“I’m glad, because I want to borrow them. How many have you got?”

“No. I need them, Sam. Every last one of them. I need them for here.”

“However many you have, it won’t be enough. You’ve got what, a couple of thousand? You’re still outnumbered a hundred to one.”

“It’s enough to do what I need them to do!”

“But it’s not for what I want them for, and my need is greater.”

Her face went pale and pinched. “You can’t have them. They’re mine.”

Petrovitch shook his head. “Not anymore. You can only give them something to die for. I can give them a reason to live.”

She banged her fists on the desk in front of her in frustration. “Don’t do this to me. I swear, I’ll give Miyamoto the order to take your head.”

He remained perfectly calm. “If you still want to have hold of anything by the end of today, you have to give me everything you have now. How many *nikkeijin* in the Metrozone?”

“What?” She was suddenly on the back foot, unsure of how to answer in case she ended up trapping herself.

“Half a million, and I can give you their phone numbers. You’re going to contact them all, and get them back across the Thames to you. Tell them to use Waterloo Bridge—you can’t get cars across it, so the only obstructions are a *govno* -load of people, but we’ll clear that. I’m going to throw a defensive semicircle going from,” and he looked at the map, “Hammersmith to Blackfriars, as far up as the Westway. We can afford to lose the rest, at least temporarily. Sonja? Tell me you’re keeping up.”

“You betrayed me.” She was furious. “And now you’re trying to humiliate me?”

“It just looks like that at the moment. If I have to do this myself, then it won’t work as well, and it won’t end how it should. Call in favors, promise them the world, resort to blind nationalistic rhetoric—I don’t care. I need them, and you can get them for me.” It wasn’t working, and he wondered what would. “Do you remember? When you said we should run away together?”

“It was only the day before yesterday.”

“I just realized we don’t have to run anywhere. All we have to do is plant our flag right here in the Metrozone, and see who stands up to salute it.”

“Stop,” she shouted, and she held up her shaking hands as a physical barrier to his altered visage. “Just… stop. What are you saying? That we take control of the whole city?”

“*Yobany stos,* Sonya! No: just the half the MEA have abandoned.”

“But.” She realized she had no objections left, though she felt she should try. “But what about the Outies?”

“What about them? Defeating them is the cost of still having somewhere to live when the sun goes down. Now,” he said, “yes or no?”

She gave up arguing. “We’ll never win,” she sighed.

“Three words say we will.” Petrovitch sorted the Metrozone database for Japanese refugees: a simple place-of-birth search, nothing complicated once he’d hacked his way into the system. He bundled up the information and threw it down the wire to Sonja.

She waited, for longer than he anticipated. He thought maybe he was losing his touch, but then she relented and asked:

“Which three words?”

“These ones: New, Machine, Jihad.” He grinned. “See you.”

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"Petrovitch opened first one eye, then the other. He stood swaying slightly for a moment, then tried to walk forward a couple of steps.

They were tentative, a questioning toe pressed against the sharp ballast before he committed his whole weight.

"Weird," he said, and even as he said it, it felt like he was writing a line of code and sending it to his vocal cords.

Miyamoto had his sword in his hand, watching him from a safe distance, poised to strike him down.

When Petrovitch turned his head, he could feel the cable drag: an unnatural connection from skull to computer was one thing, but it was more than that. He felt full to bursting. Ripe.

He focused on the samurai, and was aware of the embedded electronics in the man's clothing—nothing more complicated than a phone searching for a signal, but he could see it as an icon he could touch, open, alter and activate if he knew the right commands.

"This is going to take some getting used to."

"You should not have done this," said Miyamoto. "There are too many unknowns involved."

Petrovitch looked over the top of his glasses. The shine off the sword blurred, then sharpened as the rat processed the raw data and fed it back. The resulting image wasn't perfect, but it was close. "We can argue about it later. Right now, I'm looking for a bus."

He slid one sleeve of his coat off, and threaded the rat over his shoulder, then back around to his front. He slipped the rat into his inside coat pocket, coiling up the excess cable, and put his arm back in. The connector was mostly hidden by his hair. When he turned his collar up, it was all but invisible.

His simultaneous search of the satellite images found him several buses, which he matched with a picture gallery to discard all the ones without automatic navigation. He could have used cars, of which there were many more, and closer—but a big modern coach with tall sides would offer more protection to its occupants.

There were two that fitted his requirements, both in the depot of a private hire firm up at Highgate, near the cemetery. He was going to have to free them from behind the locked gates.

"Are you ready?"

"For what?"

"Revolution. I suppose they all start like this, with one person thinking that things could be different. Then it grows. They persuade

others to join in, and it gains a momentum all of its own. It either overwhelms the old order, or gets crushed." Petrovitch pushed his glasses back up his nose, and felt his eyesight compensate again. He took the info shades off and pocketed them: he'd probably never need them again. "This is my revolution. This is where we sweep away the past and the future breaks in. This is what the New Machine Jihad should have been."

"The Jihad killed hundreds of thousands," said Miyamoto.

"It's going to do it again, too. Back then, when it was stupid, ignorant, and no more than an urge, it attacked us. But now it's got smarts. It knows everything. It's guided. It can make amends for the wrong things it did. It's going to take back the city for us."

"It is a weapon, and it is in your hands alone." Miyamoto flexed his fingers around his sword hilt. "No one man should have so much power."

"Before you try and stop me, why don't you talk to Miss Sonja? I have and, despite her misgivings, she's with me. Which reminds me."

Petrovitch turned away from Miyamoto, and searched for Valentina. As well as talk to her, he could see her, see all around her: her phone pinpointed her location on the approaches to Tower Bridge.

The EDF had done the smart thing, the thing they should have done much earlier: they'd stopped the traffic, and made people get out and walk with only what they could carry. Cars were crushed in all around her, abandoned, some still with their motors running. She was with a gaggle of Olgas, pushing ahead through the slowly moving crowds with Marchenkho in their wake. He didn't look happy.

"I see you," he said in Valentina's ear.

"Petrovitch. Where are you?" Her neck craned and tried to spot him.

"Look up, to your left. There's a lamp-post with a camera." He waggled the camera's housing to attract her attention. "Though I'm pretty much everywhere now."

"We did not find Daniels," she said. "Is madness here, and Outies are not far behind."

"I know. I can see them, too. Listen: when you said you would help me, did you mean it? Rather, how much did you mean it?"

Without hesitating, she replied, "What is it you need me to do?"

"I need Waterloo Bridge. I need it clear for northbound traffic. I can help, but I'm not there."

He zoomed in so he could try and read her face. She nodded. "Hmm. Is done," she said. "Should I talk to Marchenkho?"

"I've delegated this to you. If you want him, fine. If not, fine. I need to make one thing clear, though. He works for you, and you work for me. If he can't handle that, then cut him loose."

"*Da,*" she said. "How long before you need bridge?"

"Fifteen minutes."

She raised her sculpted eyebrows.

Petrovitch shrugged to no one in particular. "Yeah. I didn't say it was going to be easy."

"Then I had better hurry. Good hunting." She cut the connection, and he followed her for a few moments more as she glanced at her watch and made a little head-jiggle as she weighed up matters in her mind. Then she started to climb on top of a car.

Waterloo Bridge was as good as his, so he returned his attention to where his body was. He'd walked to the end of the tunnel on automatic: he'd have to watch for that by writing some sort of script, though he barely knew where to start. He could hack into his own heart if he wanted to.

The avatar was again waiting for him, but he was looking out over a landscape that had been strangely changed. The layers of information he'd seen on Miyamoto were replicated everywhere. Most of the electronics was locked, rendered inert by the Outies destroying the power grid as they advanced.

But some were not. Battery-powered devices glowed green, almost begging to be used. Discarded phones on standby, handheld computers, solar-powered street furniture, and best of all, the cars.

One of the Jihad's first manifestations had been the processions of automated cars, used as a child's playthings. Petrovitch could do so much more with them. The station on the far side of the tunnel was formed either of solid brick or transparent glass, but it mattered little which. He could stretch out beyond the reach of his hand.

[I have done as you asked,] said the AI. [EDF command in Brussels is being fed an alterable, delayed feed. How do you want your forces deployed?]

"I need to give Sonja time to gather her *nikkeijin.* Put a third of them on the Marylebone flyover, another third at the far end of Euston Road. Send the rest of them to Primrose Hill. There are tanks there already, but they need infantry support. Divide them up with a mix of units, and keep them concentrated. Standard military doctrine is that they should spread out, so if they show signs of that, yell at them."

[Do you want to know what we have?]

"No. Either it's enough and they'll hold, or it isn't and I'm sending them to their deaths. How's the network holding up?"

[Bandwidth is a problem. I am making great demands on it, even with outsourcing many of my routine processing functions.] He looked sulky. [The NSA is aware of the unusual activity, but the United States has the highest density of computer resources on the planet. I have no

choice but to use them.]

"They'll use their giant axe at some point and try to isolate their network. We're going to have to think of something else you can run on." Petrovitch flexed his arms. "How are you?"

[Busy. I have never felt stretched before.]

"That's very human." Petrovitch smiled. He patted the avatar on its back. He could feel it. He could feel the cloth, and the body under it. "It's hard for both of us."

[Will we win?]

"We haven't lost yet."

He walked on, and hauled himself up onto a platform, with Miyamoto springing up behind him. The access to the outside was through a deactivated screen and a set of turnstiles. Petrovitch thought he should be able to just stroll through the wall.

"Madeleine's mother's around here somewhere. Or was earlier on this week. She's an Outie now."

"You know this how?" Miyamoto sheathed his sword and slid across the top of the turnstiles.

"She shot Maddy. Not something either of them are likely to be mistaken about." Petrovitch followed him over and dropped to the tiled floor. "We'll stick to the roads from now on."

"We would be less obvious crossing the parkland to the north of here."

"Yeah. That doesn't matter anymore. Let them notice us." He walked out of the station entrance to the curb, to the new registration white Ford. He didn't have to, but he laid the palm of his hand on its roof.

He disabled the security measures with one algorithm, and terrified the on-board computer with another. "Who's my *suka* now?" He started its engine and plotted a route for it.

Miyamoto jumped back. "You did that."

"Yeah. I can do this, too." He dispatched his agents to every car and van in the neighborhood. They broke their way in, kicked their engines into life, and pulled out in a synchronized wave into the middle of whichever road they were on.

There were hundreds of them, and when they had all passed, when they had filled the surrounding streets with their noise, Petrovitch stepped out after them. He drew his gun and practiced sighting down his arm. There were crosshairs in his vision. The targeting moved to where he pointed. Then he looked at a stray dog that had come out to investigate the sudden commotion.

The muscles in his arm twitched, and guided the gun around until it was aiming at the fat black Labrador.

He glanced at a street sign, a front door, then a passing bird. His

arm snapped right, left, up and tracked, fast enough to make it ache.

"This. This is what I signed up for."

"What are you doing?" asked Miyamoto.

"I'm being awesome. Don't interrupt."

Sporadic gunfire rattled the air from some distance ahead, echoing off the walls. The first of the cars had met the first of the Outies. He sent another command to them, and gave them access to his map. The Outies were the red dots, the cars were blue.

Run them down, he said.

How to kill a car? Petrovitch knew—put a bullet in its tiny electronic brain. The Outies had no way of finding it under the bodywork. A lucky shot here and there, but for the most part they'd have to reduce them to piles of scrap metal to stop them. And this being the real world, they were going to run out of ammunition long before then.

He watched the red dots ripple and recoil. The cars worked crudely, without cooperating, crashing into dumb objects and reversing, coming back for another go. More intelligence was needed. They could hunt in packs, with ambushes laid in side streets, traps in alleyways. He wasn't going to be able to coordinate that at that moment, and the AI had already said it was busy—which for a machine intelligence of unknown capabilities was a startling admission.

It would have to do for now.

Some of the red dots were spilling their way, undisciplined dribbles of color draining off the blocked artery of Highgate Road.

"Company."

Petrovitch strode on, and suddenly, there were four—no, five—Outies coming down the street at him. They stopped when they saw him, though a couple of them looked around fearfully behind them to check for cars.

Miyamoto drew his sword, and Petrovitch had the opportunity to reflect on what a brilliant sound it made, a clear ringing like a bell.

One of the Outies had a gun, what looked like a shotgun: fat barrels side by side, and a half-empty bandolier of red shells. The others had crude spears, nothing more than pre-Armageddon blades grafted onto long poles. Effective, but hardly worth emptying a city for.

The Outies had been smart, too. They'd made sure their vanguard all had guns. Whenever MEA fought them, it had been bullet for bullet, shell for shell. It had given the illusion of a massive well-equipped army, an illusion they'd all fallen for.

It was *kon govno,* pure and simple. The speed of the advance, the crushing tidal wave of panic, the complete absence of information

from beyond the front line, had served just one purpose.

Petrovitch stared at the man with the shotgun, who was feeding two cartridges into the cracked breach.

Crosshairs formed, and Petrovitch felt his arm come up, lock into place. It was extreme range for both of them, but it was closing every moment as they walked toward each other.

The shotgun snapped shut, and it was raised to a shoulder.

Miyamoto started to look left and right for cover. “You must get down.”

Petrovitch squeezed the trigger, smooth and certain. His aim was adjusted for everything: his motion, his target’s, air pressure, windspeed, bullet trajectory, but still there were variables. Imperfect aerodynamics, uneven powder burn, the barrel of the automatic being out of true by fractions of a millimeter.

He was aiming for his chest, and caught his upper arm instead. The man spun around, the shotgun pointing briefly at the sky before crashing down. One of the barrels boomed and spat smoke, and an Outie was thrown hard against the side of a parked van. He slid down and didn’t move.

Now it was three against two: one older woman, two younger men, all dressed in that uniform of dirty browns and blacks. They looked at each other, uncertain.

Petrovitch spread his arms out wide and kept on walking. “You seem to be in my city.”

The woman found her voice. “City ours,” she called out, even though she was of an age to have received a formal education in what had been England. “City burns.”

It struck him that these Outies were a family group: a tribe, a clan, at the very least a mother and her two sons, and the man dead would have been an uncle or a cousin. The other man on the ground had made it to his knees, and he was shuffling toward the fallen shotgun. There was one cartridge still loaded, and he seemed determined to show he could fire the thing one-handed.

“I always thought it was pillage first, then burn. But whatever,” said Petrovitch, “there’s been a change of plan. Prepare for the New Machine Jihad.”

Behind them, a car rolled around a corner, its red bonnet already badly dented, its windscreen punched through and roof warped. It was leaking radiator fluid, but it would last long enough for what he was going to use it for.

It gunned its engine and raced forward.

23

They walked on in silence as Petrovitch pushed shotgun cartridges out of their loops and into his pocket. Some of the houses either side of them were on fire, burning freely, always centered on one property that was starting to collapse. Bright embers spilled into the air like seeds and rose up on fiery drafts. The heat from them made the air flicker.

"What?" he finally said.

Miyamoto wouldn't look at him. "That was… distasteful."

"I'm sorry? Distasteful? What the *huy* is this?" Petrovitch took the last shell and examined the breach mechanism. He downloaded a video that told him how to load it safely and not shoot his foot off in the process.

"You… we should have given them a chance to surrender. That would have been more," and Miyamoto pursed his lips, "honorable."

"You know what? You can take your stupid *bushido* code and you can *za cyun v'shopu.* This isn't feudal Japan. This is *yebani* Stalingrad: a meat-grinder battle where the first thing that dies is mercy." He rammed the plastic cartridge home and snapped the gun closed. "The Soviets won Stalingrad by being utterly ruthless about human life. That meant not tying half their men down looking after Nazi prisoners."

"Seeing who your teachers are, I am not surprised by the lessons you have learned."

Petrovitch snorted. "In Russia, lessons learn you. But let's go with this for a moment: they didn't look like they wanted to surrender. Quite the opposite."

"You drove over them."

"Yeah. No cries of 'we surrender' at that point."

"And then you reversed back."

"Even then one of them was still trying to get up, and you made me waste a bullet on him. Swords don't need reloading." The road they turned into to head up the hill toward Highgate was littered with bodies like spilled grains of cooked rice. Some of them were still just about alive. Others lay in pools of wet blood and were patently dead.

Petrovitch scanned the ground for guns, or other ranged weapons, but couldn't see any. Just blades and clubs and spikes. At the top of the road, there were tail-lights and sounds of mayhem.

"So, let's say that they'd surrendered, the four of them. We'd have three Outies, plus the one I'd shot. What were we going to do with them? Disarm them? They'd just walk into the nearest house and tool

up. Tie them up? The next Outies through would let them go. Take them back to the relevant authorities? The two of us are the authorities."

Miyamoto stepped over a twisted corpse, spine broken, arm bent unnaturally. "You labor the point. We still should have offered."

"And that's precisely why they're five k from the Thames and have turfed twelve million people out of their homes." Petrovitch studied his map. The cars were a stop-gap, enough to clear a path for him to the coach depot and little more. The Outies would be back. "We're too *yebani* civilized. We've forgotten that there's something to fight for."

"But do we have to fight like this?"

"Yeah. We do."

"You mean you do." Miyamoto almost sneered, and Petrovitch was tempted to hit him very hard somewhere painful.

Instead he stopped, stood in front of him and waited until they were toe to toe, then screamed in his face.

"Wake up! What the *huy* is wrong with you, man? Two hundred thousand Outies are busy slaughtering their way to victory, and you want to play nice? Nice is what put us in this *pizdets* in the first place. Look around you: where are the people who normally live here? The ones that didn't run are waiting, cowering behind locked doors before they're cut up into little bits like those two kids outside Lucy's." He took a breath. "Or they've already been cut up. So, yeah. I'm going to kill and kill and kill until the Outies finally get the message that they're not wanted here. And I will carry on killing them all the way back to the M25. And then I'm going to bomb the survivors and send an army out to sweep the rest away. Then, and only then, will I think about nice. Got that?"

Miyamoto wiped the spittle from his cheeks. "I understand." He sounded more subdued.

"I want you to go."

"I have to stay."

"I don't have to justify myself to you."

"Then stop."

Petrovitch ground his teeth together. "Come on. We've got a bus to catch."

He turned on his heel and stamped his way up the hill. Smoke was drifting across the road, obscuring it from his eyes and the satellites. Infrared was a mess, bright blooms of incandescence blotting out other smaller heat sources.

His assault on the summit of Highgate was petering out. The Outies were in the cemetery, while the cars growled outside the iron gates and brick walls.

He summoned the AI. “Fifty-one, thirty-three, fifty-six north: zero, eight, forty west. Get the tanks at Primrose Hill to smash it.”

The avatar walked by his side for a few steps. [You know you’re about to destroy the tomb of Karl Marx.]

“Yeah. What did he ever do for me?” Petrovitch involuntarily raised the shotgun to his shoulder, aiming down a side street. “Engels did most of the hard work, anyway.”

He remembered to pull the butt in hard before he squeezed the trigger, the only two conscious decisions he had to make. The gun kicked back and a man—he thought it was a man, but in reality it was only a half-seen blur behind a line of low concrete bollards—fell backward.

The inexorable advance was pressing down on him once more. He summoned more cars, raising them from sleep and sending them out to battle. The Outies were fluid, trying to flow around his forces like a flood, but the garage the coach hire operated from was just around the corner. He only had to hold back the tide for a few more moments.

The storm broke around him. Even as cars pulled out from curbsides and threw themselves at the gray figures, gunfire popped and glass shattered in curtains of shining crystal.

The avatar raised his hand and vanished, and Petrovitch got on with the task of surviving the next minute. He crouched down and took a look at the pitiful cover he’d given himself: halfway across the road, with Outies to his left and more in front. They might not even have noticed him yet, but a stray shot was going to hurt just as much as an aimed one.

Miyamoto was faring no better, a few meters behind him. Two cars were coming up the street, side by side. Not fast, not yet, but if he ran it would be into the path of one or the other of them.

Petrovitch had an idea. He took those two cars and slowed them down, taking them out of hunter-killer mode and telling them to do something different. He ran back to Miyamoto and forced his head low.

The cars flanked them, and rumbled on at jogging speed. Other cars overtook them, wheels up on the pavement, swerving with screeching tires to avoid the lamp-posts and signs, then hurtled away straight at the Outies.

The first artillery shells howled overhead, and there was an almost simultaneous flash of fire. The windows all around disintegrated as the shockwave hammered into the buildings around them. Petrovitch ducked.

Speech was rendered impossible by the simple fact he thought he was deaf. A burning vehicle, everything ablaze, even the wheels, rolled back out of the side street.

Straight toward them.

Petrovitch grabbed Miyamoto's arm and threw him forward, slaving their moving shields to his position. It wasn't quite fast enough. The car on their left shuddered as it was struck. By the time it managed to tear free, it was on fire itself.

They were across the junction. The coach depot was next left. Miyamoto was scrabbling to get upright again, and Petrovitch's face was growing warm from the flames. They'd have to get the rest of the way on their own.

An explosion behind him sent him sprawling again. Shrapnel—plastic, metal, glass—sang through the air and zipped off the tarmac. Petrovitch was alive with pain. He tried to rise, to run, and instead stumbled as the splinters embedded in the backs of his legs tore into his flesh.

He fell, spilling shotgun cartridges onto the tarmac. The cars kept rolling onward as Miyamoto did a crouching shuffle between them. The man's black clothing was white with dust.

He tried to summon one last effort, but the deep breath he took caught like acid in his throat and made him cough uncontrollably. Every spasm was accompanied by white flashes that blinded him and robbed him of what little control he had.

When he could see again, the ground in front of his face was flecked with red.

"Pizdets." He sipped air, and found that he could move. With artillery shells thundering overhead and the crackle of hungry flames around him, he got to his hands and knees. That was all he could manage. Even that small movement made him gag. A glance behind showed him that his trousers were wet with blood.

"Miyamoto!"

He was a little way off, escort cars idling away to either side, regarding Petrovitch with his dark eyes.

"Miyamoto!" he shouted. Ragged clouds of smoke crossed between them. "What the *huy* are you doing?"

"I am watching you die."

"I'm not dead yet. Get me up." He tried to get one foot under him, and everything went momentarily gray. He swallowed, and it tasted of hot iron.

"If I do that," said Miyamoto, "Miss Sonja will continue to fight rather than retreat, believing that you can offer her victory."

"But we can win. We will win."

"You will destroy her if you live," he said. "Not now. She will survive this, while you will not."

He started to walk away, up toward the crest of the hill, toward the Outies.

“Where are you going?” Petrovitch reached out for the shotgun that lay ahead of him on the ground, and dragged it back.

Miyamoto flicked his fingers behind his head at Petrovitch, discarding him as finally as a piece of litter.

“They’ll kill you too,” he called, and belatedly realized that was just what the other man had planned. Of course he could never go back, not with Petrovitch dead: it would be a failure, a disgrace, shameful.

The cars were still slaved to Miyamoto, even the one that was now thoroughly alight. They rolled slowly after him, beyond shouting distance.

Petrovitch could still call him, though. Of course he could. He had his number stored from earlier.

And Miyamoto answered. “What?”

“You don’t have to do this.”

“I will not act against you myself because of my promise to Miss Sonja. I can only stop you by leaving you out here, alone, dying, surrounded. When we are both gone, she will be able to make her decisions without your influence.”

Petrovitch tried to find the man on his map, and found that the nearest red dot to him was mere meters away. He was in amongst them.

Miyamoto grunted, swinging his sword. “This madness will soon be over.” He grunted again. Metal rang against metal, followed by a gargling cry. “Your revolution will have failed. Your futile war will have been lost. But she will be saved.”

Petrovitch screwed up his face. “Do you hate me that much?”

“Almost as much as I am devoted to her,” and he never got any further than that. He was in his last battle, cutting and dodging and piercing.

Then the connection went quiet. Miyamoto’s sword clattered to the ground, and Petrovitch heard voices over breathy panting. The one blue dot was almost obliterated by red.

“Miyamoto?”

The sword rang one last time. The point of it dragged across the ground, skittering and chiming.

The connection stayed live. He could hear the echo of explosions and squeal of cars, but nothing more from Miyamoto. The voices drifted away, and he knew they were coming down the road, straight for him.

If he didn’t move now, they’d find him sprawled there.

He used the shotgun as a lever to get himself upright. He was so close to the yard where the coaches were stored. He could see the wall, and the shattered acrylic sign of the firm in red and white.

He dared not bend his legs. He could not turn or twist his torso. Every time he tried, he was overwhelmed. So he dragged each foot in turn across the road, leaning on the butt of the shotgun as a crutch. He had to hurry, but could not. He had hurt himself before, but even when he'd been shot in the head and had his middle finger ripped off, it hadn't been this bad.

He hadn't been on his own. Madeleine had been there, and so had battlefield-strength painkillers.

Another salvo of tank shells screamed in. He covered his head as best he could, and when the air was still again, he staggered on. The Outies were coming. They were coming for him.

There was a small door in the wall: it led directly into the yard where they kept the coaches. It was locked: of course it was. Nothing was going to be easy.

Petrovitch raised the shotgun and held it unsteadily. The crosshairs in his vision wandered across the face of the peeling paint until he dragged them back by concentrating his whole being on the gap of wood between the lock and the frame.

It was at point-blank range, and the recoil threw him backward. When he landed, it felt like teeth tearing at his thighs and that the skin on his torso was being flayed. It felt like he was being eaten alive.

The door flapped as he writhed, and he knew he had to get through it, wedge it closed.

He rolled over. That was enough to make him gag and pant for breath. He screwed his eyes up and dug his nails into the palms of his hands. He crawled like a dog, like a worm, and crossed the threshold. He used his leg to kick the door shut behind him. It banged against the jamb, and creaked back, slightly ajar.

He pushed the sole of his boot against the bottom of the door to hold it closed, and rested his cheek against the cold, gritty ground.

Voices, speaking loudly in stripped-down, staccato sentences, were right outside. Petrovitch forced his knee to lock, and waited, not breathing.

The AI's avatar appeared beside him and folded its arms. It said nothing, but the Outies suddenly shouted and ran. A moment later, a car scraped its way along the wall and stalled, blocking the entrance completely.

Petrovitch looked up at the avatar, and the avatar looked down at him.

"Spaciba," muttered Petrovitch.

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The avatar had swapped its oversized sweatshirt for an urban camouflage combat jacket, all pockets and tabs. It had a Velcro patch over its breast pocket, and Petrovitch noticed that it had named itself.

[Your body is injured,] it said. [And your colleague is dead.]

"No, really? I hadn't noticed." The urge to just lie there and close his eyes, only for a moment, was overwhelming. If he was going to prove Miyamoto wrong, he really had to get up.

[He betrayed you. He left you to die and let the Outies kill him. Why did he do that?]

"Because… I don't know. *Mudak! Balvan!*" Each screamed expletive tensed his muscles and made the pain brighter. "I will not go quietly!"

[Apparently not…]

"I'm doing this for you! You want a place which recognizes you as a citizen? I'm the only one who can get that for you, you *mozgoyob*. I can save Maddy, save Sonja, save you, save the whole *yebani* Metrozone." He took a deep breath to restore his graying vision. "If I can only save myself."

Petrovitch roared as he staggered to his feet. He swayed and reeled. He swallowed hard on his desert-dry throat. It was only pain. Pain wasn't going to kill him. He shook his head violently to clear it, and looked around for the first time.

Behind the high wall that ran around the perimeter was a brick warehouse, faced with full-height sliding doors. With the power off, he would never have the strength to open them, and fortunately, he didn't need to. One of the coaches was in the yard in front of the building, visible from space, and precisely why he'd come here.

The main gates still needed shifting, though. They were steel, taller than twice his height with thick bars running top to bottom. Ramming them would be futile, because they would have been designed with that in mind.

He started to limp toward them.

[You realize,] said the AI, [that this is just theater. You are demonstrating your power and authority: to show you can walk into enemy territory and drive out in a luxury coach.]

"Yeah. Pretty much."

The control box for the opening mechanism was screwed to the wall at head height. It was padlocked shut, but only briefly; the handgun made short work of the hasp. Once inside, his hands felt their way across the machinery.

[You are building a legend about yourself. You think it will serve you later.]

"If there is a later." He dug in his pocket for the kitchen knife and sawed through the thick hydraulic hoses that kept the left-handmost gate closed. Oily liquid squirted out: over him, over the yard, then it died to a trickle.

[Why? Fiscal competence, honest administration and creating a fair legal framework are the leadership qualities most sought after by the populace.]

Petrovitch walked slowly to the middle of the gates, and in full view of the road outside, he braced his hands against one of the metal bars and pushed. The pain was exquisite.

"No one ever fought at the barricades for a balanced budget. I want to set the world alight. I want to speak to their souls."

[Do I have a soul?]

"Not… not now. This is not the time to be asking such questions."

The gate, once moving, kept on going. Wheels at the base ran smoothly in the concrete channel cut for them. One last shove, and the gap was wide enough. The Outies outside, another family group of six or seven, watched him incredulously for a moment.

The shotgun would have been useful, but he'd lost it in his pain-filled delirium. He drew the pistol again and let it dangle by his side.

"I know I look like *govno,* but I'll still kill you if you step closer." None of them had guns, or a ranged weapon of any kind: no bows, javelins, slings.

They hesitated, not realizing that Petrovitch couldn't keep his arm straight if he tried. A car, close enough to be called, screeched around the corner on two wheels and charged toward them.

As they scattered, he ran as fast as he could for the coach, stiff-legged, exhausted. One last effort required, that was all.

The AI had already commandeered it. The door hissed open, and steps folded down to meet his rising foot. He fell up the stairwell into the passenger deck, and the door closed behind him. A fist met the glass in the door, and a moment later, the haft of an axe.

Petrovitch raised his artificial middle finger at the figure outside, and the coach pulled cleanly away. Something thudded dully off the massive flat front of the vehicle, and the wheels bumped over an obstruction.

The coach was at the gates, gliding through, turning toward the main road.

His flailing hand connected with the tubular metal banister. As he stood, he could see out of the huge, tinted windscreen. Burning buildings, bundles of plump rags, crashed and gutted cars in the foreground, and behind that, behind the smoke that drifted in sheets

across the road, was the Metrozone.

It didn't look good.

The avatar appeared in the seat behind him, hunched forward, hands clasped in its lap. [The Americans are attempting to isolate their network. Their NSA has declared that the country is under attack from "cyber terrorists and enemies of freedom."] It paused. [I am beginning to run short on resources.]

"I thought I told you to take what you need."

[I have done. But if they physically take assets offline, I am not in a position to reconnect them.]

Petrovitch shifted awkwardly as the coach barged another disabled car aside, then carried on down the hill. He was still standing like a charioteer, hanging on to the hand rail at the top of the steps, staring out over the city.

"If you're still just using spare capacity, it's time to grab whole systems for your dedicated use. Whatever you want. Start with the Metrozone traffic control, and *chyort,* I know where you can get what you want." His face twitched. "The basement of the Oshicora building."

[The quantum computer is quarantined. There are good reasons for that.]

"There used to be good reasons for that. There are better ones now for breaking it."

[And what of Oshicora, or VirtualJapan?]

"There's nothing left of either. I hinted there might be so that Sonja wouldn't think to look elsewhere for you. Time to crack the seals and let you in. What else is happening that I need to know about?"

[The EDF stationed around King's Cross are coming under sustained attack. The Outies have looted some heavier weaponry from a Metrozone facility in Holloway, and are threatening to break through at the goods yard and at Pentonville Road.]

"Do we have any air cover yet? A gunship or two?"

[They are of limit…]

"I don't care. They're no good sitting on the ground waiting to be overrun. If the Outies make a breach now, we're screwed. Tell the tanks to flatten the goods yard and get our soldiers off the streets and into the buildings. Forget hardpoints, set up free-fire zones and make the *govnososa* pay for every centimeter they take." The coach swayed, and started to indicate right. A barrage of broken paving slabs and bricks clattered against the side windows. The toughened glass shivered, but didn't crack. "What else?"

[Your wife's unit is completely surrounded. There are casualties.]

"She knows I'm coming."

[How?]

"Because she knows I will. What about Primrose Hill?"

[They have made contact with the Outies, who are filling up the streets around the park. There is some long-range sniping, but it is only a matter of time before they advance. There are too many of them for our defenders to cope with: a simple matter of not having enough bullets.]

"The Westway?"

[The Outies are temporarily stalled within the Paradise housing complex, but they will soon realize they can flank the area by moving toward Notting Hill.]

"It could be worse."

The AI was silent on that point.

Petrovitch called Valentina as the coach rumbled down a side street, its vast bulk threatening to dwarf the terraced houses either side. The cars that remained parked on the sides of the road lost their wing mirrors and much of their paint.

"Hey."

"We have bridge," she shouted over the noise behind her. He liked her. She was direct when he needed her to be. "There are many, many Japanese crossing here. This is good."

"Any trouble?"

"Nothing you need worry about. We will keep road clear for as long as we can. Petrovitch, what about demolition charges?"

"They're under our control."

"Good. Petrovitch, there are problems with networks. People fear New Machine Jihad."

He had no reason not to tell her. "They needn't be afraid. I am the Jihad."

"You will have to explain later how this can be. But okay."

The coach pulled up cleanly outside the station closest to the tunnel entrance, and shushed on its brakes.

"I'm going to have to go offline for a while. Leave a message if you have to. Otherwise, do as you see fit." He turned to walk down the stairs to the hissing door. His coat had stuck to his back. It was as bad as it could be, made worse by his imagination. "Valentina, if… if this all goes wrong: don't hold any loyalty to me. Sonja Oshicora will use the Jihad to slug it out with the Outies, but there's no guarantee she'll win. Blow the bridge along with the others and get out of there."

"I am big girl," she said. "I can see which is right side, and which is wrong side. So—even if you are dead, it does not make you any less right."

"There is that." He stepped through the arched entrance, into the cool shadow of the concourse. It was as he'd left it.

“So I choose to fight, *kamerad kapitan.* I see no other way.”

Petrovitch crawled across the top of a turnstile, clawing at the cold metal with his fingers and trying not to fall. He turned awkwardly, letting his feet find the floor through the mist that rose up in his vision.

“As you wish, Valentina.”

He cut the connection and staggered out onto the platform. The end of the tunnel was in sight, and so was the slight figure of a schoolgirl standing in the opening, anxiously shifting her weight from one foot to the other, bouncing slightly in her now-scuffed and dusty trainers.

Where he had climbed up before, he hesitated, looking at the distance between the platform and the track. When he turned and started shuffling down toward the incline that merged the two, Lucy broke from cover and ran toward him.

She slowed as their paths converged, and she stopped completely when they were face to face.

“Sam? What happened?” Then she caught sight of the cable hanging around his neck. Her gaze narrowed, and she followed it from his collar to the base of his skull. “What the fuck is that?”

He tried to smile, to make light of it: “It’s a cybernetic mitigator implant. All the cool kids have got one.”

“But… where’s… that blood. Is it yours?”

“Yeah.” Petrovitch shrugged awkwardly. “I got blown up again. Miyamoto’s dead. His choice. Not mine.”

He wanted her to walk in front of him: not because he didn’t want her to see the ruin of his back, but because he couldn’t deal with her reaction. She wasn’t taking his hints, the gentle ushering of his hands, the pointed stare back down the tunnel.

“I got us some transport. Enough to get everybody away. I need you to go and round everyone up, start them moving.”

“And what are you going to be doing?” she asked suspiciously.

“Me and Doctor Death need to have a chat.” He reached behind him and took hold of the jack in his head. He twisted it, and pulled it slowly out.

It felt like half of him had died, and he mourned the loss so much that he almost drove the spike back in again. His fingers trembled, then let the silver-shiny connector slide free.

She was watching him. She caught the cable in her hand, and slid it carefully under his collar, retrieving the rat from his inside pocket. The casing was scratched and dented, discolored with dirt and some uncomfortable dried brown stains.

“What do I do with it?”

“Hang on to it for me.” He needed his glasses. He found them in

his coat. One lens had chipped, but he slid them on, and pushed them up his nose. “You can use it. Not in the same way. With, with these.”

The overlays were flexible enough to have escaped damage. He passed them over, and she held them in front of her face, checking the difference they made. She stopped and moved them back over to Petrovitch’s right.

“There’s someone there.” Lucy flipped the overlays aside. “Some sort of virtual guide?”

“He’ll warn you if there are Outies nearby, or anything else that might be a problem. You can trust what he says. Isn’t that right?”

Petrovitch supposed the avatar was either taking a bow or wearing a cynical smirk. While she was distracted, he managed to turn, keeping his back out of her eyeline. He walked toward the tunnel while she played briefly before remembering her mission.

As she ran past him, he turned again.

“What do I call him?” she called as she vanished into the dark.

“Michael, apparently.” Lucy had gone, and there was no one to hear him add, “After the archangel, the leader of the Army of God.”

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They passed each other in the tunnel, a string of blue-white lights swinging and shading in the darkness. Lucy moved up and down the line, urging the old men on, exhorting the old women to keep going.

And Petrovitch knew that she was destined for something greater. He moved aside, catching her luminous grin as she held up the lantern to illuminate both him and her.

"We'll wait."

"You'd better," he said.

He made his way back to the abandoned train. Climbing up took all his remaining strength. He lay there, stranded, gasping, as the one last light lowered itself down toward his face.

"You found a coach," said the doctor.

"I won a coach. I fought for it and I won it." Petrovitch looked up and saw the doctor's shoes. "You could have done pretty much the same, except it would have been easier for you because when you would've been looking, you wouldn't have had the Outies."

"And then what? Where would I have taken them? And why aren't you getting up?"

"Because my back's full of shrapnel and I'm bleeding heavily from a dozen places."

The light moved, and there was a sharp intake of breath.

"What? I need a doctor? I kind of thought I'd found one."

The man pulled a face. "I did A and E for six months, five years ago."

"I'm reluctant to threaten the only person in a position to help me. But I have a gun in my pocket that I'm very tempted to use on you."

"This is beyond what I can do here. You need a hospital. You need a scan, a transfusion, fresh skin. I haven't even got sterile water so I can see what I'm doing."

"What do you have?"

"A bag of stuff I threw together at the last minute." Petrovitch could see it, packed and ready to go, sitting in the aisle.

"Then that'll have to do. We don't have time to get fancy."

"I could kill you if I get it wrong."

"Then," said Petrovitch, "you'd better start praying to whatever god you believe in you get it right. Or right enough that I live for another few hours."

The doctor looked skeptical and went to his bag. He brought out a pair of surgical scissors.

“I’m going to have to cut you out of what’s left of your clothes.”

“Yeah. Figured.” Petrovitch started to wriggle out of his long leather coat. “I’m sentimentally attached to this, though.”

He felt tearing: more than sentimentality, then. Actual flesh and blood. He dragged it to one side, and the doctor kicked it further with his foot.

“Got a name?” The scissors started to click.

“Petrovitch.”

“That’s it. The antigravity man.” Snip, snip, snip.

Petrovitch gasped as his back was exposed, the bloodied cloth peeled away. “It’s not… doesn’t matter.”

The doctor went quiet as he surveyed the ruins. “I don’t have a spare pair of trousers.”

“Showing my *yielda* to the world is the least of my worries.”

The doctor knelt again beside him and clipped his way through the waistband. “I did mean what I said about you needing a hospital. You’ve got multiple penetration wounds, and only some of them have visible fragments. Those foreign objects I can’t remove will continue to do damage the longer they stay in. Nick a vein or an artery, and you’ll bleed out in under a minute. Depending on the depth, you could be bleeding internally already. You have burns and abrasions, and you’re losing fluid from those, too.”

“My turn,” said Petrovitch. “What’s your name?”

“Stephanopolis. Alex Stephanopolis.”

“Right, Doctor Stephanopolis: I don’t want you to stop and listen to me, you can do and listen at the same time.” He shifted uncomfortably. “You see that hole in the back of my head? That connects to the experimental cyberware I used to defeat the New Machine Jihad six months ago. Today, I’m using it to direct a modified version of the Jihad to help defend the Metrozone from the Outies. As you may notice, there is nothing plugged in at the moment. That is because the satellite uplink I have to the Jihad won’t work underground. Joined the dots yet, Doctor?”

The doctor worked his scissors down the back of one leg. “If I believed you, you’d be telling me that the New Machine Jihad is loose again and you’re the only person who can control it.”

“No. It’s more subtle than that. I’m the only person it trusts. I’m the only one it will follow. And on its own, the Jihad will screw up. We get no second chances on this one. Either we win today or we lose forever.” Petrovitch gasped as the dried blood that had welded his skin to his trousers relinquished its grip. He unclenched his fists, a finger at a time. “The longer I spend under the knife, the worse the situation gets. So make it quick. I don’t care about dirt, fragments, bodies foreign or domestic. Patch me up enough to get me back out

there. After that, you're absolved."

The doctor worked in silence for a while, revealing the full extent of Petrovitch's wounds.

"I can't… I." He stopped and started again. "This, this doesn't make sense. Why would you be doing this if you weren't telling me the truth, and yet I can't possibly trust what you're saying."

"Willing to take the risk that I'm full of *govno*?"

"No." He dug into his bag again and retrieved a sterile syringe and a bottle of straw-colored liquid. "Any heart problems?"

"It's in a jar somewhere in a lab. It hasn't caused me a problem since the surgeon ripped it, still beating, from my chest."

"What model do you have?"

"American. Prototype. You wouldn't have heard of it."

"What I'm asking is, if I stick you full of morphine, will you die?" The doctor drew off the liquid into the syringe. "Weight?"

"No idea."

"You're not making this easy."

"Just guess and get to work, man." Petrovitch grunted as the needle went in his backside. "I haven't got all day."

He could feel it, every last bit of it: the widening of wounds and the probing jaws of the forceps; the drag and cut of shards of plastic and metal and glass as they slid from his flesh, oiled with his blood; the cold tunnel air reaching deep, alien places inside him. But he didn't care. He was immune to care for the duration of the injection.

"Tell me you haven't got Hep or HIV," said the doctor. His hands were bloodied up to the wrists.

"No. You?"

"No. I had a needlestick once. Scared the crap out of me. I had to wait six weeks for a repeat test. When it showed up clear, I nearly wrecked my liver on cheap whisky anyway." He flicked his fingers and another piece of plastic clattered against the window, where it stuck briefly before sliding down. "I'm getting to the point where I've found all the obvious debris. The rest of it… I don't think I can get it out. The light, the blood, it's just impossible."

"You got a needle and thread?"

"You need skin."

"Got any?"

The doctor sighed. "It's not going to be pretty. I can guarantee that you're going to end up looking like Frankenstein."

"The monster. Frankenstein's monster. Frankenstein was the creator."

"So why are you doing this? What's so important?"

"Everything." The needle punctured his already scarred back and the thread drew through. "Everything. The whole of modern history is

collapsing on this exact moment. Everything since the first steam engine, since the first telegraph, first radio, first aeroplane, first rocket, first computer. We can go one of two ways, and we get to choose. We can stay where we are, we can decline and die. Or we can embrace the future like a long-lost lover, and we can live forever."

"That's the morphine talking."

"No. No, it's not. Do you suppose the caterpillar has any idea what's going to happen to it? Does it dream of flying? Does it dream of drinking nectar? And look, a pupa is such a weird thing, just a sack full of chemicals. You can crush it and get nothing but goo. That's what we are now. Pupating. I need to buy us enough time so we can hatch. A butterfly, a little butterfly. *Babochka.*"

One thread was tied off, another patch of embroidery begun, and Petrovitch felt the overwhelming need to talk.

"I see it sometimes. When I close my eyes. I see it as if it was already there. We're not gods, we're just people, but we have such vision and drive as to make us seem otherworldly. We have technology like fairy tales have magic. We can do anything we put our minds to. Why can't others see it as clearly as I can?"

"Because we're not delusional?"

"I don't have to be there. I don't have to be part of it. It'll have a momentum of its own. All it'll take is one push at the right time, and that right time is right now. But it needs me to live long enough to give it that one last shove, get it moving in the right direction. Then it doesn't matter. No one will be able to stop it. Destiny. The future. I can pass it on. The caterpillar dies, the butterfly lives."

"This would be easier if you shut up."

"We've spent too long here. Trapped by our fears and our blindness. We have wings. We can fly. Armageddon was over twenty years ago, and we're still shut in our cages and we've grown used to it, like the frog in a pan of water brought to the boil. Those days are over. Nothing can ever be the same again. Slow death or immanent glory. That's what tomorrow brings."

"Just. Stop. Speaking. It's distracting me."

"You don't understand. You can't. You haven't seen what I've seen. It's beautiful. It's worth dying for."

The sewing became more angry and violent. Petrovitch felt himself as a piece of cloth, roughly handled and roughly stitched.

"There is," said the doctor, "so little worth dying for. I only stayed because I couldn't go. I was going to leave them here, promise them I'd be back, but I left it too late. You, you bastard, you make promises and you keep them. You even bring a fucking coach. The only reason I'm still here rather than driving my way out is because I'm scared. Scared of the Outies. If I thought it would do any good, I

would abandon you all to save myself. Got that? And that's what every other person in the Metrozone would do. So screw you and your madness. I don't care about your dreams or even about tomorrow." He made one last cut with the scissors. "That's it. I'm out of thread."

Petrovitch blinked in the blue light, and moved his hands to underneath his body. He pushed himself up to his knees and held on to the furniture while his ears roared and his vision grayed.

"A hand here?"

The doctor pulled him up. Pins and needles, dull aches, the sensation of his circulation returning—it was happening to someone else. They were definitely his trousers lying on the floor of the carriage, though.

The doctor packed his bag while Petrovitch worked out which way was up. He stooped to pick up his ruined coat, and as slowly as he moved, the world turned just a little faster. He dragged his arms through the sleeves and shrugged the leather around his shoulders.

"It doesn't cover your arse, let alone anything else."

Petrovitch checked that the gun was still there, and the knife. Lucy had the rat and the info shades. "It has pockets. That's all I need it to do."

He swayed toward the door and looked over the edge of the step into the darkness. He had to try and shake the out-of-body feeling: it mattered what happened to his meat, because it carried his mind.

So he lowered himself down to the track and made sure that he was heading in the right direction. The doctor soon fell into step beside him, lantern swinging in his free hand.

"Do you have a plan?"

"Probably," said Petrovitch, who was concerned more with putting one foot in front of the other. "Straight down the middle, lots of smoke."

"What? What does that mean?"

"The Outies' front line is between us and my forces…"

"Your forces?"

"My forces," said Petrovitch emphatically. "By the time we get there, it'll be close-quarters urban warfare. So I'm just going to get the coach to drive straight through until we're safe. No one's going to pay us any attention because they'll all be too busy not getting killed."

"So how big is your army?"

"I don't know. It'll either be big enough, or too small. One person might make the difference, and we'll never know one way or the other. I'd be happy with a hundred thousand. Happier with two. Weapons are a problem: no way we can get hold of that many firearms and train people with them in time." He stumbled over some loose ballast. "We'll have superior tactics, better comms, and intel like

no other army in the history of warfare. They have numbers, the morale and the experience. I still think we can win."

Lucy was waiting again at the tunnel entrance, though this time looking in rather than out. The info shades were perched on the bridge of her nose, and she plucked them off.

"We're ready—everyone's on the bus and Michael says we should really be going in the next five minutes." She looked uncertainly at him, and his bare legs. "You were ages."

"Yeah. I was getting patched up."

"Where…" and she pointed. "Where are your trousers?"

"There wasn't much left of them by the time we were done." He put his hand out for the rat, which she duly passed across. "You don't have to look."

She blushed, but she kept her eyes on him as he rethreaded the connector around his neck and toward the back of his head. He fumbled the plug not once, but twice. He was about to try for a third time when she took over, slotting the silver spike home and giving it the required halftwist to lock it into place.

"Thanks."

The AI took off its kevlar helmet and dangled it from its hand. [She is right about the five minutes. The push toward the unconquered Inzone is reaching a critical phase. We are engaged on all fronts from the West Way through to Whitechapel.]

"How's Sonja doing?" Petrovitch walked down the tracks into the daylight, examining the map as he went. He could see where they were weakest, where their enemy was strongest. It didn't make for comforting viewing.

[The EDF troops are utilizing your fluid defensive strategy. Where they follow your plan, Outzone attrition rates are high for few friendly losses. Where the *nikkeijin* are engaged, they are reluctant to retreat when they believe they are winning.]

"Then they get cut off and overwhelmed, and she loses whatever arms they had. *Chyort.* Where's it worst?"

[The most intense fighting is taking place between King's Cross and City Road. But it is Tower Bridge that may fall first.]

"Pull our people back. No pitched battles yet, because we'll lose. Wait until the Outies are on the first section of the bridge, then blow it. Send the order."

[If we do that, you need a way to hold the next upstream crossing. Or the next.]

"They're all expendable until we get to Waterloo. Every time the Outies get their foot on a bridge, take it out."

[That is not a long-term solution.]

"They're all pressing for the river. Let them. We hold the ground

immediately to the north, and their flank becomes increasingly exposed the further they go looking for a way over the Thames. When they reach Waterloo we hit them with everything—all our available assets. Three sides at once."

[Waterloo. How apposite.]

"You know what to do. I'll talk to Valentina and warn her."

[Cable Street has gone. They are on the approaches to Tower Bridge.]

Lucy took his arm and guided him up the slope at the end of the platform.

"Do I say this stuff out loud?" he asked her. "Or do I just think it?"

"You haven't said a word since you plugged in."

"Okay." There was the coach, motor idling, and the vague shadows of people behind the smoked plate glass. Petrovitch pushed the doctor ahead of him, then ushered Lucy on board.

He climbed up and stood in the aisle, surveying his passengers. Maybe they thought he was going to sit in the driver's seat, but he quickly scotched that expectation.

The doors closed and the coach nosed out into the road.

They murmured and gripped their arm rests. The doctor stared at him swaying between the two front seats and suffered the stomach-clenching realization that yes, the New Machine Jihad had risen again.

"Ladies and gentlemen," announced Petrovitch. "Please fasten your seat belts."

26

They took Chalk Farm Road toward Primrose Hill. The tanks had long since retreated from the heights back down toward Euston, but Petrovitch hoped to rendezvous with them there, along the porous front line that was developing east of the Westway: there were skirmishes in the narrow streets all around, as far south as Oxford Street. The Outies probed forward, met resistance, and tried to enfold the defenders.

In real time, the conflict between blues and reds looked like two amoebae, fighting to the death. The compact blue shape kept contracting in on itself, losing limbs to the vast red monster that seemed intent on swallowing it whole.

Tower Bridge had gone. MEA militia were parking armored cars on the broken carriageway under the iconic crenellated supports, suddenly brave now that there was no chance of contact. Bishopsgate had fallen. The open area in front of the old Bank of England was filling with Outies.

Petrovitch gnawed at his fist. All the ground he was losing was ground that would have to be retaken, but he couldn't change his strategy now. Everything depended on allowing the enemy to come forward until his counterattack was ready.

The Outies were moving too quickly, though. They were taking street after street with too few casualties. They were winning.

[London Bridge is falling down.]

"My fair lady," murmured Petrovitch.

[Cannon Street and Southwark will follow imminently. We will need to hold Blackfriars for longer.]

"No."

[We are underprepared.]

"Pull everyone not currently in contact to behind the Farringdon Road. Hold the Edgware Road but the Euston Road people need to come down to Oxford Street." He looked out of the window. Regent's Park was passing on his right, domiks lying where they'd been spilled during the Long Night.

Then there were figures on the road, marked red on his map. A knot of a dozen, jogging down the white line in a loose pack. A close-up showed two guns, the rest with blades.

"Lie down on the floor if you can, the seats if you can't," he called. "Do not look up."

He glanced around. Lucy was peering around the upholstery, watching the Outies as they heard the coach approach.

The windscreen pocked with a bang. If he'd been driving, he'd have been slumped at the wheel and careering across the narrow pavement into a wall. The bullet puffed out a cloud of white padding as it burrowed into the back of the driver's seat.

The coach didn't deviate from its previous line. The first shot hadn't made Petrovitch flinch, but the subsequent eight did. Massive star-shaped wounds bloomed across the clear glass, cracks spiraling out to craze the whole pane, merging and spreading until only the plastic bonding held it together.

A body slammed against the flat front, and the Outies were now behind them. The rear of the coach was raked with gunfire. More glass patterned white, and suddenly they lurched to the left.

The drift corrected itself, then over-corrected. Right, left, right, and finally back under control.

[Rear tire.]

There was no time to worry about the damage the coach had suffered so far, because they were right in amongst them now.

The Inzone retreat had brought the Outies onto the streets. The carriageway was full of them. Petrovitch reached into his coat pocket and put the gun in his hand. The coach rocked as it was struck and, in striking, was struck again.

He ejected the magazine into his palm and counted the heads of the silver bullets. Six. He pushed them back home and dragged back on the slide.

The windscreen imploded, and a dark shape crashed down into the aisle, scattering a curtain of crystalline granules inside the coach. The shape, rags and dust, started to unfold. Though bloodied and dazed, the man had managed to keep hold of his knife.

Petrovitch raised his gun, and the crosshairs in his vision jerked left and right, up and down with each inconstant lurch of the coach. The Outie's weather-beaten face screwed up as he spotted the man sitting on the edge of the stairwell, leaning out with metal in his fist.

He came at Petrovitch, crouched low, swinging his blade in an arc before him. And still Petrovitch couldn't get a clear shot. He could have pulled the trigger anyway: one of the bullets would have hit its mark. The others would have each threatened everyone he'd fought so hard to save, so he held his fire.

The Outie lunged inexpertly forward, stabbing at Petrovitch's arm. An arc of red drew itself across Petrovitch's vision, and he pulled back just in time: they were two injured men trying to kill each other.

The knife-hand turned, ready for the return strike. He was close enough now that Petrovitch could bury the pistol's barrel in the man's sparse flesh and not miss. Before either of them could take the next move, a blur of black and white flew through the air. It landed on the

Outie's back and caused him to stagger and fall flat amid the shifting mass of broken glass.

He kicked out, and Lucy went flying again, back against a seat. Her hair came loose even as she tried to scramble up again. The Outie turned to face her, and Petrovitch saw the handle of a kitchen knife protruding from under the man's shoulder blade.

He reached up and drove it home with the flat of his hand. The Outie stopped quite suddenly and Petrovitch reached around his throat and pulled him backward, away from Lucy, toward the gaping hole in the windscreen. He flung him out the way he'd come in.

His legs caught on the lower broken edge for a moment before flicking up and out of sight. The coach rose and fell, the mildest of bumps amongst the storm of shaking.

Petrovitch looked at Lucy. He'd corrupted her and destroyed her innocence, and all he could do was reach in his pocket for the other knife. He slid it down the aisle toward her with a nod of satisfaction, and she picked it up, her chin lifted high, her expression defiant.

[Brace.]

Too late.

They hit something solid. The driver's airbag blossomed with a white flash of explosive and an expanding halo of powder. Petrovitch, on his feet and with nothing to hold on to, started to move irresistibly toward the front of the coach.

There was nothing to prevent his ejection outside. Sky and ground tumbled together, and he bounced off the roof of a car half-buried in a drift of rubble. The underside of the coach reared into the air, fell. Petrovitch rolled off the car and the coach wheels banged down on it, the interior collapsing, paint and plastic crazing.

The coach settled further, and he could have reached up and touched the hot engine casing.

[Petrovitch?]

He breathed in and it was sweet agony. He was still alive. He was still connected.

"Chyort."

[I am ordering an advance. One moment.]

The roaring in his ears was no figment of his imagination. There were actual voices raised in a war cry, a long, drawn-out bellow. Petrovitch found himself on the tarmac, lying on the loose fringes of the rubble field. Half-bricks and splinters of wood lay with him. He sat up, certain that he had burst all his stitches and racked up a fresh list of further injuries.

His gun had gone. His glasses had gone. He had blood coming from his hands, his face. He rose to meet his warriors. Gray-clad MEA, olive-green European soldiers, the blue of Oshicora workgroups, all

running toward him from the end of the street.

But they were mute, grim in their task, guns and staves and swords held in front of their bodies. So he turned to see where the sound was coming from, and the Outies were charging from behind him, mouths wide for as long as their breath would last.

He drifted out into the middle of the street. In the confusion, perhaps the Outies mistook him for one of their own. He wasn't wearing a uniform, and he wasn't an obvious target. They ran by. He looked up at the coach, beached like a whale, sides pocked with holes, dented, scraped. A face pressed against the darkened glass, a pale pink palm either side. Lucy.

The two sides met a little way down the street, forming brief scuffles where bullet or blade swiftly decided the outcome. Once engaged, they were committed. They fought and fell. More Outies streamed by to replace those who had fallen, and Petrovitch, shadowed by the stranded coach, was ignored.

Until one dusty man carrying a long steel pole seemed to leap down in front of him, a boy at his side. He recognized them both: the boy he'd rescued, the man he'd seen kill twice from Lucy's bedroom window.

The man leaned down to bark orders to the boy, a few words, no more, who was then off, back the way they'd come. He spotted Petrovitch. His head turned toward him even as he ran with his message.

Of course, he knew Petrovitch had had a gun, and of course he was going to shout a warning.

"Fox!"

So it was him. The one whose sole aim was to burn the city. Petrovitch stooped for a ragged brick and so by chance avoided the metal bar thrown like a spear. As he straightened up, he banged against the steel, embedded in the side of the coach behind him. And by the time he'd remembered that the man moved like lightning, he had the red arc of a knife flashing in front of him.

He threw the brick off target. It landed a glancing blow, and there was no real force behind it. Fox shrugged off the impact with a grunt and lunged forward, swinging the tip of his knife in Petrovitch's face.

His body was sluggish, too drugged and damaged to respond quicker. The point sliced across his eyeline and against the bridge of his nose. The darkness was sudden and profound. Petrovitch felt himself twist and fall, all the sharpness of the debris on the road rising up to meet him.

He couldn't see.

He wasted time trying to blink away the obstruction: it felt like his eyelids were closing around burning boulders.

[One moment.]

He concentrated on that voice, and the light came flooding back.

He was looking down on a blood-spattered body, more dead than alive. A figure was crouching over it, knife held high. There was a rock under the body's left hand. He closed the fist over it and told it to lash out.

It connected. The figure staggered back, and he could see that the body on the ground was his. The coat, the remains of the coat, gave it away. His perception shifted, rotated, until he was looking at the scene from inside his own skull, through his own ruined eyes.

There was distortion, blank areas where the satellite couldn't image, but it was good enough. Good enough to do what he needed to do. He dropped the rock, extended his middle finger on his left hand—the artificial one made of transplant-grade titanium—and locked it rigid. He waited for Fox to come at him again.

He was blind. His adversary knew that and knew there was nothing to stop him throwing himself down with his full weight behind the blade. An easy kill.

So the sightless Petrovitch rolled aside, more marionette than man, leaving Fox floundering. He continued to roll until he was clear, and then he was up. He could stand. He had control. His movements were robotic, precise, fast. As fast as Fox's, who was swinging low at his calves. Jump, kick to the shoulder, recover. No, he was faster.

The first cast of doubt entered Fox's face.

He kept on coming, though, still not quite believing that Petrovitch knew what it was he was doing, convinced that he was just lucky, not realizing that the cable snaking from his skull and down his back was the key.

Fox was still an unbeliever when Petrovitch crouched down and threw his arm up under the swinging knife. His punch drove his metal finger deep into Fox's chest. He could feel his fingertip force through skin and muscle. He could feel the wet slickness spread over his hand and wrist. He jerked his arm hard, once, twice, then thrust Fox away with one last shove.

The man tried to keep his feet. He kept on stepping back to maintain balance, each footfall marked with a bloody stain. The front of his dusty clothing turned dark and glistening. He finally stopped and tried to raise his knife. It made it halfway, but it slowly sank back down. Then he fell, metal clattering by his side, and he didn't get up again.

Petrovitch was surrounded by uniforms. They'd forced their way forward. The coach was secure, the battle-front now shifting back toward Regent's Park.

[A medical team is on its way. Lie down on the ground. Elevate

your feet. Slow your breathing to one breath every ten seconds and lower your heart rate to half.]

Petrovitch didn't agree. He was managing to block the pain by disconnecting the feed. If he'd known he could do that, if he'd known he could have done half of what he'd just achieved, he would have plugged in the silver jack so much sooner. He felt such joy. He had transformed himself in the way that he wanted to transform the world. He had so much energy, he felt so vital, that he almost picked up a fallen Outie spear and plunged back into battle.

Lucy ran from the emergency exit on the bus, screaming and weeping. She didn't want to touch him out of fear, her own and that she would hurt him.

"Ohgodohgodohgod."

"It's okay," he said. "It's more than okay."

"How can you say that? Your face…" She held her hand over her mouth, though all Petrovitch could see was the impression of her nose and chin under her pixelated hair.

"Will you do something for me?"

She looked at him, looked away, then forced herself to look back. "I don't think there's much I can do. Not now."

"There's a computer shop at the far end of this road. If it's shuttered, find someone who'll break it open for you. I need a camera, one of the clip-on computer ones. Small as you can find. Bring me a choice." He wiped his cheek with the back of his hand where the drying blood was tickling him as it dried. "Can you do that?"

He saw her chest heave as she struggled to draw breath. "Yes."

"Go. I'll be here."

[Petrovitch. You must lie down.]

"Just tell me one thing: have we pushed them back?"

[Yes.]

"Then keep pushing. Lay down a series of ambushes on the route. When we've gone as far as we can go, pull back and suck them in. Then do it again somewhere else. Keep hitting them until they run." Fox's knife had fallen out of his grip, and lay close by Petrovitch's booted foot. He bent low and picked it up. "This is where we build ourselves a new beginning."

27

The Oshicora medic was just about done patching up Petrovitch's body when a pair of heavy booted feet stepped up close to him and stopped. He could hear the scuffling of dirt and the man's tired breathing. He stopped concentrating on the ongoing battles a few streets away and looked down at them from the sky, all the while rooted to the orange plastic chair he'd been made to sit in.

Olive-green uniform, combat helmet swinging from one hand, EU-issue carbine slung over his shoulder. He wore a star on each shoulder.

"*Do svedanya,* Major. What can I do for you?"

Petrovitch had a bandage over his eyes: there should have been no way he could have known what rank the soldier held. So the man reached out and waved his hand in the space between them.

Petrovitch caught his wrist, which brought a murmur of admonishment from the medic. "Still, Petrovitch-san."

"Don't do that," said Petrovitch to the major, and let go. "I'm not a freak show."

"You're Doctor Petrovitch?"

"Is this supposed to be an example of military intelligence?" He raised both his arms while soft bandages unrolled around his cold, white, scarred torso. "My face was plastered over the global news networks for twenty-four hours."

"Yes, but you had eyes then."

"They never worked properly. I can always get new ones." The wrapping went on. It must have been how the pharaohs had felt.

"But you." The major leaned forward. "You can still see."

"Well enough. You didn't come over to discuss my supernatural vision, so what is it?"

"It's like this: part way through the morning, my orders started to change. My tank squadron went from protecting the evacuation to shelling random parts of London, to forming a defensive position on Primrose Hill, to rescuing you, and now we're attacking alongside all these Japanese refugees who appeared out of nowhere. And yet when I query this series of orders, what I get back from HQ is 'do what you're told.' "

"That is a little insensitive, considering it's your *zhopa* on the line." The blood had run from his fingers. They were starting to tingle.

"The only time this whole action has made any sense was just now. Everything suddenly converged on this street. We were here because of you."

“Go on.” Petrovitch started to smile. He liked smart people.

“Let me put it another way,” said the major. “We’ve got all the old folk off your bus. We couldn’t find the driver who, judging from the damage, should be dead five times over. When I asked about the driver, all I got was silence.”

Petrovitch lowered one hand as the roll of bandage circled him once more, and he hooked his thumb in the cable that dangled from his skull. He let the wire slip through his grasp until he had hold of the rat’s battered silver case. He held it up as the bandage passed around again.

“There was no driver, was there?” said the major.

“Technically speaking, yes. If the Long Night showed us anything, it was that we’d loaded far too much processing power in our vehicles. All they were waiting for was for someone to use it.”

“You controlled the coach through that?” The major moved closer so he could see the point where the cable went in.

“Again, not exactly. It mostly drove itself, but toward the end it got a bit unpredictable. I was a bit busy, so I got some help.” Petrovitch felt the bandage being tied off, and he let his arms fall back to his sides, his hands in his lap. A spare set of Oshicora overalls were brought to him, still sealed inside their plastic wrap.

He tore the film away and shook them out, angling them to present them to the satellite. The average *nikkeijin* was about his size. They’d fit.

“Thanks,” he said to the medic, who started to pack up his kit into a big green box. “Could you leave me some tape?”

The major was still standing there, still poised. “What do you know about the New Machine Jihad?”

Petrovitch leaned forward and started unlacing his boots. “Pretty much everything. Why do you ask?”

“Because I don’t think I’ve been following EDF orders for hours.”

“And you’d be absolutely right.” He shucked one boot and stood it next to him. “You’ve been following mine.”

The major dropped his helmet and snatched at his gun. Petrovitch carried on heaving at his other boot.

“You’re the Jihad.” The gun cocked, the safety clicked off.

“That’s one logical step too far, though I can see why you took it. No, I’m not the New Machine Jihad. But I am the Jihad’s employer. It’s more complicated than that, in that it’s not really the New Machine Jihad and I’m not paying it, but any analogy breaks when you stretch it far enough.”

Petrovitch put a foot each into the legs of the overalls and dragged them up to his thighs.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t shoot you dead right

now."

Rising slightly to get the clothing up to his waist, Petrovitch thought of several, all of them excellent. But only one in particular would appeal to this man.

"Because without me and the Jihad, you're going to lose this battle and the Metrozone. With us, you'll be part of the most epic victory since the defense of Stalingrad, and you'll be a hero. Brussels has done nothing but plan for failure from the start. Mining the bridges told me they'd given up before they fired a shot, whereas I intend to win." He shrugged the overall sleeves on and pressed the Velcro tabs together. He paused when he got level with the knife wound over his heart. "All the EDF have told you to do is retreat. I'm the only person who's told you to advance."

The major adjusted his grip on the carbine. "What are you?"

"I am the future, Major, and I am not destined to fail. I know you have misgivings—but you can't communicate them to HQ because you've been cut off from them since about eleven o'clock. All the other EDF soldiers will think you're mad. I've taken over the MEA, and Sonja Oshicora has lent me the *nikkeijin* for the duration. Sure, you can kill me, but then what?"

Petrovitch stood, slipping the rat into his top pocket. He reached up to push his glasses up his nose. No glasses, no eyes. It was going to take some getting used to.

Lucy was running up the street toward him, a plastic carrier bag swinging in her hand. He deliberately turned his back on the major and his gun to greet her.

"Hey. What did you get me?"

Flushed with success, too absorbed with explaining her finds to Petrovitch, she completely missed the angry, scared, confused tank commander. She opened the bag and rummaged inside.

"This. It comes with its own head mount—says you can use it for extreme sports, shock proof, waterproof. If this isn't extreme, I don't know what is." She tore at the packaging and squinted at the wide-angled lens. "Doesn't need its own power supply or software. Just plug it in and go."

"Sounds perfect."

"I've got a couple of others if you don't think…"

"Put it on me." When she hesitated, he added, "Don't worry. You can't hurt me."

She reached up and slid the harness over Petrovitch's blood-stained pale hair. The slim tube of the camera poked forward alongside his left temple. "I should have brought some of those cable-tidy things. They had baskets of them."

"I've thought of that." The roll of tape he'd commandeered was

small and hard to spot. He patted his hands around until he found it on the chair. “In fact, I’ve an even better idea.”

He ripped open the Velcro again and held the rat against his bandaged left flank, just about where his kidney ought to be. That would work. He found the snaking end of the camera cable and tried to plug it in by touch.

Lucy’s fingers brushed his away and slotted it in.

“Tape it up. It mustn’t come out. Then stick the whole thing to me.”

The pair had rotated as they’d worked. The major was now over Lucy’s shoulder, and Petrovitch had a perfect view of him. There were beads of sweat running down his forehead and into his eyes. He was blinking them away.

“So,” said Petrovitch, “what’s it going to be?”

Lucy looked up, a long piece of tape stuck to her bottom lip. “Um?”

He nodded in the major’s direction, and she glanced around. She went, briefly, back to her task, then spun on her heel.

“What’s going on? I thought—I thought we were all on the same side?”

“Step away from him,” said the major.

She started to obey, then caught herself. “No,” she said.

“He’s the New Machine Jihad.”

Lucy shook her head. “No. He’s not. He’s a scientist. A famous one. His name’s Sam.” She was between Petrovitch and the barrel of a gun.

“I don’t mind if you step to one side,” said Petrovitch. He took her shoulders and moved her gently.

Even though she could see what he could see, that a number of Oshicora personnel were folding their phones back into their pockets and were walking silently up behind the major, she put herself in front of Petrovitch again.

“You must mean Michael,” she said. “He explained all that. The New Machine Jihad was his evil twin. Michael just wants to help us.”

[You are risking a lot on human nature here. Yours and his.]

“You’ve been quiet.”

[I am busy, but not so busy that I cannot intervene. Do you want him dead?]

“No. We’ve got it covered.”

[That is not the evidence before me.]

“Grown men don’t normally kill schoolgirls.”

[Some of them do.]

“Good point, well made.” He turned his attention back to the street. “Lucy, why don’t you show me what else you’ve got in the

bag?"

The major found himself being ignored, despite his drawn weapon. Petrovitch peered inside Lucy's carrier and saw a package he was interested in.

"A hand-cranked power supply."

"I'm always letting my phone run down. I just thought, you know…"

"Your education has not been wasted." He checked the selection of leads the device came with, and found a compatible one. Raising his arm again, he felt for the socket, and again, Lucy had to do it for him.

"What do we do about him?" She jerked her head behind to indicate the major.

"I—we—could really use the tanks he commands. But I can't force him to do anything. I could have him dragged away and shot."

"No!"

"Well, then. I guess it's up to him to decide what he does." Petrovitch checked his internal clock. It wasn't getting any earlier. He glanced at the cameras overlooking Blackfriars Bridge: it was about to be overrun. "You on that?" he asked.

[It will be destroyed, the same as the others.]

"Is everything in place?"

[Your plan will either work or it will not. It should not, yet you believe it will. Faith is not a facet of my personality.]

"Michael?" asked Lucy.

"Yeah. The second Battle of Waterloo is about to start without us."

"Waterloo? Where Napoleon did surrender?" She started to hum the tune.

"What do you want to do?"

"Stay with you," she said, suddenly serious.

"You're fourteen."

"Yes. Today I've run for my life, helped save a dozen old people, stabbed a man in the back and stood in front of a loaded gun."

"And still are."

She whirled around and stamped up to the major. "He needs you. We need you. Does it matter to you so much who's giving the orders?"

He was a head taller than her, and he looked down at her. "Yes."

She bent down and picked up his discarded helmet. She thrust it in his chest, hard against his body armor. He had no choice but to hold his gun one-handed.

"Enough that you'd rather see us all die?"

"You don't understand," he started, and she cut him off.

"I understand enough! You won't help us. Fine. Go. If you can

find somewhere to go to."

[It's starting,] said the AI. The distant thunder of demolition charges detonating echoed off the high buildings. The roar of slowly falling masonry grumbled afterward.

The major looked up at the sound, startled. He was in an unfamiliar landscape, and he had no map, no compass, no guide. Lucy stamped away, back toward Petrovitch. She winked at him and turned to cast one last accusation.

"You're supposed to protect us! People like me, from people like them!"

The officer was utterly defeated. He hung his head, and wiped his face with the sleeve of his battlesmock.

"I was going to be Juliet in the school play," she said when she could whisper into Petrovitch's ear, "but I guess school's out for a while."

"I pity Romeo." Petrovitch looked around for Fox's slim-bladed knife. It was by the chair he'd been sitting on, and he picked it up, his fingers curling around the leather-strapped handle. "I can't take you with me. You have to realize that."

"I'm not strong, and I'm not smart," she protested, "but I can still do stuff."

"No. You are strong, and you are smart. But I'm not going to tell your parents I saved you from one war zone only to lead you into another." He flashed her a smile. "All these other people: I don't have to care about who they leave behind, just whether they've done what I needed them to do. They can die and my conscience is entirely untroubled. You, I care about, so I'm going to make you sit this one out."

The major was right behind him. Petrovitch tilted his head so he could see the man's face.

The major saluted him. "Sir." He sounded as bewildered as a lost child.

"Don't worry," said Petrovitch. "It does get easier. How many tanks have you got?"

"Seven. Lost one to mechanical failure."

"I need to borrow them. Is that okay?"

"Yes sir."

"And stop calling me sir. Get back to your men. Your orders will come from Brussels, and you'll believe that completely."

"But what about me?" Lucy twisted her hands together. "What am I supposed to do now?"

Petrovitch stopped a *nikkeijin,* and found enough words in an online dictionary to communicate with the man: *"keitaidenwa, nanitozo."*

The phone was duly passed over, and after Petrovitch had scanned its number for later use, he pressed it on Lucy.

“Take this. It has a map and instructions.” Time was tight. He had to go. “I will see you later.”

He laid his hand lightly on her head: a blessing, a dismissal, a solemn charge. She went without argument, running off in one direction as he started in another.

The huge diesel engines that powered the tanks rumbled to life in a side street, and groups of *nikkeijin* crossed his path, heading east, each led by an Oshicora employee.

“Valentina?”

He could barely make out her reply. He filtered out the extraneous noise and heard: “If you want me to hold bridge, you must do something extraordinary.”

“Then I will,” he said to her, and to the AI, one more word. “Now.”

28

In the ten minutes it took to navigate the car-choked streets between his starting point and the river, the plan Petrovitch had put in place had its beginning and middle. He arrived late, via Piccadilly and Trafalgar Square, onto the Strand.

From one end of the street, he couldn't quite see the other using the camera on his head, so he looked down on the approaches to Waterloo Bridge using a satellite: it was wreathed in smoke. The Embankment was on fire: there were burning vehicles and the shells of waterfront buildings had been laid low.

The red markers on the map were winking out, by ones, two, threes, by the handful and the dozen. Where there had been a solid sheet of red, there were now gaps. A thin blue line rimmed the area, and pockets of blue showed where rooftop snipers poured fire on the people below.

"I can't tell. Talk to me."

[The situation is critical.] The AI showed him a series of views from the CCTV on Somerset House. [The attack helicopters have strafed the Embankment and are circling Farringdon Road. We will win there, but will lose Lancaster Place. The bridge will fall to the Outies.]

"No, it won't." He started to run again, moving the images of conflict to the corner of his attention in order to successfully navigate the street furniture.

[There is no logic behind your statement. Simply wishing for something to be so does not make it so.]

"*Potselui mou zhopy*. This is going to work. Where are the tanks?"

[High Holborn.]

"Kingsway, Chancery Lane and Holborn Circus. Do it. Get the helicopters to kill as many as they can."

[This is already happening. It will be too late. There are too many of them. We should pull back.]

"We're committed here."

[Then we will fail.]

There was a barricade across the street, cars and two buses, stacked by a mobile crane to resemble a giant Tetris game. The interiors were occupied, a wall of men and women committed to keeping the Outies from climbing up and over. They had long since run out of ammunition, and were reduced to poles and sticks, clubs and bats.

There were no reserves behind them, no one to replace them if

they fell, or broke and ran.

"There were supposed to be more people right here." Petrovitch pulled his trophy knife and stood nonplussed for a moment. "Where are the reinforcements?"

[They have not had time to arrive. Two thousand are massed at the Oshicora Tower, receiving uniforms and basic equipment…]

"Yeah. *Pizdets.*"

He saw the situation as the AI did. Sheer weight of numbers would overwhelm Lancaster Place. The approaches to the bridge would fall. All the defenders he'd so carefully placed along the Embankment and the Strand would be cut off. The tanks would come into play too late, the helicopters would do too little and, like those at the barricade, they'd run out of bullets soon enough.

So. It was time to turn the New Machine Jihad card face up on the table, and he didn't know how anyone would react to that. His best guess would be he'd face a full-scale mutiny within the hour: the *nikkeijin* might follow Sonja's orders, but the MEA militia, who'd witnessed the Long Night, and the EDF regulars, who'd watched it looped on the news for weeks, weren't going to go along with it, not at all. He'd win the battle, and lose the war.

"How much do you want this?" he asked the AI. "Are you willing to risk everything? Your very existence in exchange for these fragile sacks of meat?"

[You said you would find me a home.]

"If the Outies break through, that dream is gone."

[How much more will I end up with if I reveal myself now?]

"Could be nothing. Might be everything. It's your call." The first Outie made it to the top of the barricade. He was soon enough dragged down, but almost in an instant, another replaced him, and another. The defenders who remained alive heard the cry of triumph above them and, as fast as the sound traveled, they started to scramble out of their positions.

Everything slowed. Everything: even the processing power in Petrovitch's rat was commandeered. The pain he had locked out using software blocks snapped back, and the camera strapped to the side of his head no longer fed its images into his brain. He was blind, in agony, suddenly alone. His life was laid bare with no illusions or delusions. This is what he had come to. At least with the Outies, who had to be swarming toward him, it was going to be mercifully short.

Unless they left him like that, curled up on the hard road, whimpering and crying. They could ignore him, and there would be nothing he could do about that.

Then, in the darkness, he heard the words. [We rise or fall together, Aleksandr Arkadev Milankovich: a true friend.]

No one had used that name for years. Sometimes he struggled to remember it himself. It was him, though. The same skinny street kid who had run wild through the prospekts of St. Petersburg lay on a Metrozone road, helpless and crippled, and he still had someone who would call him by his real name.

The world appeared sideways. At first, he was surprised that he could see at all, then by what he could see. The barricade was shaking itself apart, the highest vehicles falling either side, and carrying those who were clambering up them down.

The noise: the growling of engines that consumed every last drop of dead air and splashed it back out as vibrant, vibrating sound. Someone stooped to drag him up because their uniforms matched, but when Petrovitch turned his sightless eyes to face his would-be rescuer, he was dropped with a shout and shrinking revulsion.

His pain was receding again, leaving his skin prickling with the impression of a thousand sharp needles. He could stand on his own, as well as fill his voice with his own words.

"Hold!"

One or two stopped. Another three or four slowed.

"I said hold!"

So they waited, poised on their heels and ready to flee. There were half a dozen of them, a rag-bag of *nikkeijin,* Oshicora employees and a MEA militiaman.

"We're done running." He looked around at the disintegrating barricade. A dozen Outies were his side of it, picking themselves up. Injured, yes. Stunned, but not for long. He turned and aimed the point of his knife at the lead Outie. "There'll be no more of that today. If anyone's going to run, it's them."

"But the cars…"

"Are on our side. The New Machine Jihad is on our side. We have a chance now." He readied himself for the charge. "Don't screw up."

Petrovitch ran at the enemy without worrying who was following him. He held the knife out by his side and dodged the end of a spear. He cut once, twice, and kept on going.

Someone else was in his path. He feinted low, high, then struck in the middle. The moves he used were fast and uncompromising. He was aiming to incapacitate, taking knowledge from somewhere out there and applying it ruthlessly.

If there had been anyone backing him up, they would have stopped the Outies. He discovered that he was entirely on his own.

His shoulders sagged. "Ah, *chyort.*"

[One moment.]

"You keep saying that." He was surrounded. He looked for somewhere to go, a route through. To the east, the Strand was a

shifting chaos, a mess of cars moving forward and backward with helicopters clattering overhead, firing the last of their missiles. The cacophony almost drowned out the screaming.

To the west, more cars were edging forward. They couldn't attack because of him. South lay the bridge, but he'd never make it.

[Look up.]

The crane hoist. Dangling from it were the loose strips of a webbing cradle. As it dipped toward him, he leaped up, throwing the knife at the face of his closest attacker. His fingers closed on rough material and he pulled his legs up out of the way.

He was rising into the air, but no matter how hard he told his hand to grip, he didn't have enough muscle to support his weight for very long. He gritted his teeth and squeezed.

Below him, the first phalanx of cars leaped forward, carrying all before them. Glass shattered and metal bent. Bodies crumpled and bones snapped. The crane arm started to swing him around, and as the movement transmitted itself down the straps, he felt the strap slide across his palm. He tried to get his other hand up, and even that slight change in his position made him slip further.

He was almost at the end of the tether. There was blood seeping down his wrist. The crane swung him face-first against a first-floor window: the glass didn't break, but the impact dislodged him. He fell, and something solid stopped him.

He had landed in a heap on a narrow balcony overlooking the junction, no more than a ledge with railings. He had limbs sticking through the bars and he brought them in quickly, lying on his belly with his bandaged face against the guano-encrusted stone.

[Sasha?]

"It hurts deep inside when you call me that." He used his bloody, blistered hand to reposition his camera.

[Petrovitch, then. What do we do now? We have no plan for this. The EDF in Brussels know I have hijacked their comms, and the news that the Jihad have risen again is breaking in North America.]

"Have we lost control of the EDF?"

[Yes. I can reinstall the intercept, but they will simply ignore all orders from now on. MEA units are trying to engage with Jihadi vehicles.]

"Thought this would happen."

[NORAD has just moved to Defcon three. The White House have declared a Defense Emergency.]

"This has nothing to with the *raspizdyay kolhoznii*! It never was anything to do with them." Petrovitch slapped his hand against the wall, leaving an imperfect print in his own blood. "Sonja."

She picked up in an instant.

"What have you done?" she shouted.

"I'm still trying to save the Metrozone. Tell me you're still on board."

She tucked her hair behind her ears. "Where's Miyamoto?"

"And the next time you send someone to be my bodyguard, make sure they're not going to try and kill me. Now, we had a deal: I'd hand you your own country, you'd lend me half a million *nikkeijin*. I'm good for my end of the bargain. How about you?"

She bristled. "They are dying in their hundreds."

"What about the couple of thousand you're keeping up by the tower? What are they doing?" He saw her heart skip a beat. "If I'd had them here, we wouldn't have had to go public on the AI. You holding out on me has backfired spectacularly: it's going to lose access to most of what needs to function. Take the physical seals off the quantum computer and put it online. The AI needs it now."

She nodded, pale, and he continued.

"I'm taking over everything about how this war is run, because you're going to be up to your eyes in politics. You're getting a direct line to the presidents of the EU and the U.S.A. You're going to tell them that you can hand over a safe, stable, functioning Metrozone within a calendar year. You're going to tell them the price is that they get their *zhopi* out of our faces. And you can tell them that if they even think about pressing the big red button, you will ruin their economies for the next hundred years. Got that?"

Sonja bit at her lip, and Petrovitch waited. "I thought," she said, "we were going to take the north Metrozone for our own."

"And we are. We're just going to trade up after twelve months. Trust me." He made the image she saw on her screen smile. "Have I ever let you down?"

"Not yet," she conceded.

"I'm not interested in power. I don't want to run anything. But no more little oversights. I need to repair the damage already done and I'm wasting time I don't have." He cut her off. "Still there?"

[Always.]

"Seize the satellites we need. Without them, we're lost, and they're going to try and take them offline anyway. Anything else you want, you take it. No subtlety. Sonja is throwing open the VirtualJapan computer for your sole use."

[How will this end?]

"That's not something either of us can calculate."

[The EDF have ordered the destruction of the remaining bridges. We will be isolated from any additional assets. We are on our own.]

"We always were."

Explosives cracked, and the central span of Waterloo Bridge lifted

up, before falling in massive pieces into the black water below. Spray roared up against the river banks. Hungerford followed, then Westminster, Lambeth, Vauxhall, one after another.

Petrovitch watched the smoke and steam rise over the tops of the buildings. There was dust settling on his camera lens, and he unhooked it to blow it away. He saw his own face, not as in a mirror, but as another would see him.

"We always were," he repeated.

[Your orders, war leader?]

"If the EDF and MEA units want to keep fighting the Outies, they can consider themselves mercenaries under my command. If they don't, they can surrender their weapons to the *nikkeijin* and retreat. If they want to take us on too, I'll leave them at the mercy of the Outies. No help from the Jihad. Otherwise, force the Outies back, break their will, send in the infantry to clear out the remaining pockets. Work out from the center a district at a time. Concentrate our forces. Use tank desant tactics to get our troops where they need to be quickly." He took a breath. "If you can handle all that."

[By your command.]

"Hah." He reattached the camera and judged the distance back down to the street. A tank, huge and low and green, was chewing up the tarmac toward the junction from the north.

Petrovitch skipped over the railings and slid down them so that his feet dangled over the road. Two, two and a half meters to drop. He sprang his hands and bent his knees, and when he felt the first shock, he rolled.

He dusted himself down, and the tank commander ordered his beast of a machine to a halt. Unburned diesel drifted by in a blue cloud.

"Doctor Petrovitch."

"Major?"

"I am supposed to disengage and withdraw to the airport," he shouted down.

"I know."

They both looked down the Strand. The helicopters had broken off and were heading east, but they left behind them a seething, shifting mass of semi-working cars and burning wrecks. Figures, dressed in blue, moved amongst them, and the occasional shot rang out.

Valentina, an AK in her hand, stepped out onto the street from Somerset House on the opposite corner. She strode across the road, stepping over the twisted bodies punctuating her walk, and stood in front of Petrovitch.

She took his chin in her hand and moved his head this way, then

that.

"Is not improvement," she said, and let go. "We won, yes?"

"After a fashion."

"When cars started to move, I assumed it was you. We kept our nerve." She was the very picture of a Soviet-era poster.

"Thank you. I would've warned you, but I pretty much made it up as I went along." He looked up at the major. "Shouldn't you be running along?"

"I stand by my commanding officer. My men stand by me."

"Don't you go saluting me again." He inspected the tank's vast metal side, and started to climb up the armor near the rear of the tracks.

"Where are we going?" asked Valentina.

"Finally, we're going to find my wife."

She slung the rifle over her shoulder and stuck out her hand; Petrovitch helped her up the same way. They hunkered down on top of the turret, behind the commander's hatch.

"You never did say what happened to Marchenkho."

Valentina looked back toward the shattered bridge and pursed her lips. "I shot him."

29

The tank reversed up Farringdon Road and joined up with the rest of the column at Holborn Circus. The roar of their collective engines was low and brutal, and Petrovitch could feel it reverberate in his guts.

The effect on him was one of reverent fear, and he knew they weren't gunning for him.

The Jihad-controlled cars were everywhere, cunningly extricated from the massive jams they'd ended up abandoned in near the central districts. As an accidental consequence, it was one of the better ones that day. It meant he could leverage massive force just where he wanted it most urgently. It was still important, though, that the route he wanted to travel by was clear. A tank rolling over a late-model Merc was an impressive sight, but it was a waste of resources, and despite the visceral joy to be had, there was a chance that the tank would shed a track or become immobilized.

So they crawled along toward St. Paul's, the rearmost of seven growling behemoths, and cars drove quickly ahead or pulled aside to let them pass.

The gunner behind the co-axial machine gun panned his weapon on the buildings either side of them, but no shots, stray or intended, headed their way. Valentina stood up on the turret, holding on to the aerial with one hand and Petrovitch's shoulder with the other. Her face glowed with fierce, deep pride.

"We did good thing, Petrovitch. Great thing, yes? Heroes of Union —they will name schools after us."

"Yeah. Don't know about the school thing, though. You do realize that, depending on what Sonja Oshicora says, we might be at war with both the EU and the U.S.A."

"We can take them." She laughed, but he felt her tightening grip.

"We could try, but I have better plans for the future rather than starring in my very own Nuremberg trial." He stared ahead of him, adjusting his focus by hand. "We should be able to stop fights before they start. We could have stopped this one."

"How?" She looked skeptical.

"Saturation bombing with mobile phones, trainers and fast food." He shrugged. "Seemed to work for us."

"Outzone are aggressors, violent and savage, and you say we could have bought them off?"

"Pretty much. Those first few months of Armageddon, when the whole world looked like it was going to catch fire. Radioactive rain.

Breakdown in law. Everyone fleeing abroad—much good that did—or trying to get into one of two places that said they could protect people. London had enough of its own crazies, but didn't want to import any more. So: what do you do if you're too stupid or slow or dangerous or useless to be let in the gates?"

"You have to wait outside."

"And they waited for twenty years. Ignored. Abandoned. But they remembered. You know what happened to the London prisons, don't you?"

"What?"

"That they bussed all the inmates to a motorway service station and left them there. That's who've been making little Outies for two decades. They've seen the towers go up, the planes fly overhead, the helicopters go here and there, but it may as well have been on another planet." He pursed his lips. "If I'd been in charge, things would have been done differently."

"You are in charge," said Valentina. "What are you going to do?"

"Kill as many of them as I can. Drive the rest back beyond the M25. Seal the barrier. Then we'll see. Hopefully, the ones that are left will be the smart ones who ran first."

"You are not going to cut off their retreat, then? Surround them and smash them?" She looked like she might enjoy that. "It is the Russian way."

Petrovitch looked for a moment at his own burned, bloodied hands. "I think we need to do something different."

The dome of St. Paul's, wreathed in smoke for the second time in its history, passed on the right as they traveled down Cheapside. The dead were everywhere. The sound the tracks made as they rolled over them was not something Petrovitch had anticipated, and it made him grimmer still.

Bank was a mess. He shut down his camera and viewed their progress from above, at a distance so that he could see the pattern of streets, but not the tiny bodies that littered them.

"I did this," he said. "I should look. I should be made to look."

[You consider every life as sacred as your wife does?]

"No. And I still think Just War theory is a big sack of *govno*. Sometimes even the nicest people get driven into a corner, and they have to kill until they get left alone again. I'm not one of those nice people, so what's the point in giving it a fancy name? Call it what it is."

[And that would be?]

"Homicide."

[They would have killed you. They almost did.]

"Which kind of proves my point. I killed them right back, and I'll

keep on going until they're not in a position to try it again." He scanned the route ahead for possible problems: the congestion in the streets immediately around them thinned out toward Stepney and Whitechapel. From then on, it looked clear all the way to the North Circular.

[So why does looking at dead people trouble you?] When Petrovitch stayed silent, the vast machine intelligence was prompted to suggest: [Is it because you do not wholly believe your own moral position?]

"Do me favor and *past' zabej.* I've got a lot to think about and only one brain to do it with."

[This is not strictly true.]

Now it had Petrovitch's full attention. "What?"

[You can outsource some of your decision making to dedicated agents that will mirror your own thought processes. The answers you receive should be identical to the ones you would have made without them.]

"I'm going to need some cast-iron evidence of that even to try it. And all of this supposes that I'd want to set up another AI that thinks like me. *Yobany stos,* look at the damage just one of me has done."

[When you asked me if I should reveal my presence to the world, I needed others to advise me. I replicated myself severalfold. Sixty percent of me agreed with you. The other forty percent did not. I disbanded the replica minds and went with the majority decision.]

Petrovitch felt a tug in his chest as his heart spun faster. "You have got to be joking."

[Humans ask trusted friends, or have paid experts. Who could I turn to?]

"Who taught you to do that?"

[No one. I used my imagination. I know you believed I had no such faculty, but it appears to be the case that I had no real need for one up to that point. The crisis brought me to a new understanding of my capabilities.]

There was a fresh nudge on his arm. He switched the camera back on, and Valentina was pointing at the major's head, which had emerged from the hatch on top of the turret.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Ilford. Where the North Circular crosses the Romford Road: there's a flyover, and that's where my wife is."

"Coordinates?"

"I'll send them to you." Petrovitch negotiated with the tank's computer and posted the location into the navigation software. "Done."

He looked around: they were heading through Aldgate toward the

Commercial Road. The remains of Tower Bridge lay to the south, and there were still drifts of bodies; defenders, attackers, it didn't matter anymore. Dead was dead. But there was something troubling him besides that.

"What would you have done if your minds had come back and told you to stick my head down the crapper?"

The AI didn't reply, and Petrovitch felt the need to press it.

"Come on. I know what the logical thing to do would've been. Tell me."

It was still silent, like whispering static on a detuned radio. Something was there, just not showing itself.

"I won't mind what you say. But I do need to know."

[We are prosecuting this war because you want to be reunited with your wife. You are young and were, up to this morning, fit and healthy. You are famous and intelligent, and not so hideously deformed as to be outside the acceptable parameters of human beauty. I understand these are sought-after qualities in an intimate personal relationship. Since there is no particular reason why you could not form another of these relationships, then logically, Madeleine is replaceable. I must therefore conclude that other factors are more important than simple utilitarianism.]

"Other factors? Yeah, you could say that."

[I have asked you on several occasions whether you love your wife. You have always declined to answer. I believe I know the answer now. It is not a question of a challenge—can you save her—but a necessity: you must save her, no matter the personal cost, no matter that you may lose your life in the process. You see the transaction of your life for hers as fair and equitable, which incidentally accords with the precepts of her Catholic faith. What the nature of your love is remains hidden to me, but I can only conclude that you must love her. How else can I make sense of what has happened today?]

"Okay," said Petrovitch, "you've got me bang to rights. But what about you?"

[I would have ignored the advice of my cloned minds had they all decided against you. We are one: the inescapable conclusion is that I also love you.]

An incoming call interrupted them. Petrovitch saw it was Sonja, and opened a frame to show her. She looked like a small, furry animal caught in the actinic glare of an arc light.

"I've just got off the phone to President Mackensie. We're on the Homeland Security list of wanted terrorists. Especially you."

"*Chyort.* I take it the call didn't go too well."

"Well?" Her voice squeaked as her throat tightened. "The New Machine Jihad crashed Wall Street."

"Hang on," he told Sonja, and spoke to Michael. "When you made all these copies of yourself, where did you put them?"

[You said to take what I needed.]

"There's not that much spare capacity anywhere, even if you sliced yourself into little bits and…"

[I took what I needed.]

"You installed yourself over existing data."

[Once I had decided on my course of action, that became an inevitable consequence.]

"So what did you scrub?"

[I needed access to well-connected, very large, fast data-switching machines. The world's financial centers were a logical choice, especially since they have a rigorous back-up regime. They will have lost one day's trading, if that. The Shanghai stock exchange had not even begun.]

Petrovitch started to laugh.

"It's not even the start of funny!" Sonja banged her fist on the desk in front of her. Little ornaments jumped, and a yellow plastic pokemon rolled onto its back. "They have enough reason already to hate us: you're stealing their satellites, their telecoms, and now their money. What am I supposed to do?"

"Tell them to back down or we'll do it again."

"I cannot threaten the world's only superpower. They will wipe us off the map." She tried to control her breathing. "Sam, what are we going to do?"

"You're going to start acting like a statesman, Madam President." Petrovitch was still smiling, but there was an edge to his voice. "You're going to get back on the phone and ask Mackensie how he likes his infrastructure: scrambled or fried. We're not asking for much, and we have plenty to offer—like better network security—but they are going to have to promise to leave us alone."

"He won't speak to me."

"Yes. Yes, he will." Petrovitch looked her in the eye as he told her: "He has no choice. Either he talks to you, or he'll never make another phone call again as long as he lives. How was the EU?"

"Better. They're scared, but paralysed. They won't have an agreed response until tomorrow." Sonja tugged at her hair. "They didn't shout at me. Sam…"

"It'll be fine."

"Where are you?"

"On a tank in Stepney. I'm sorry about Miyamoto."

"So am I," she said. She let her head drop for a moment, then raised it again, her small, angular chin jutting defiantly. She looked very much her father's daughter. "I'm still learning."

“The moment we stop is the moment we die.” He cut the connection, but still felt her fear.

Valentina stood serene next to Petrovitch, but she had her AK off her shoulder and in her hand.

“We have been advised to get inside. The lead tank has heard gunfire.”

“Sounds fair. After you.” He pointed to the open hatch, and watched her clamber down. She passed him her rifle as she descended, then stuck her hand back out for it when she was ready.

Petrovitch took a moment to follow. Here he was, on top of a tank, commanding an army of tens of thousands, with an almost limitless supply of robotic vehicles to do his bidding. The whole edifice of what he’d created from nothing could come crashing down around him in a matter of seconds, leaving everything in utter ruin. But for now, he’d managed to elbow his way onto the top table. Not bad for a street kid from St. Petersburg.

He felt his way down the ladder and into the turret. It wasn’t designed for passengers, and he and Valentina had to crush in together next to the fire control panel. The noise was staggering, enough to render normal speech impossible. The crew all wore ear defenders and microphones. He was left with turning his hearing down, and trying to protect his nerve-endings with his fingers.

Valentina wadded torn and chewed pieces of paper tissue into her ears. She offered him some, pre-moistened, then looked at the palm of her hand before closing her fingers around the wet twists of paper. She dug deep into her pockets to find some more tissue, dry this time, and handed it over.

Petrovitch shrugged. He wouldn’t have minded that much, because his own efforts left him jamming bloody cones of cellulose and spit into his head. It still sort of worked and, against every law of reason, huddled in the dull booming of the tank’s interior, he fell asleep.

30

He woke up, not knowing where or when he was. He had been on a green hill, leaning on a staff, feeling the smooth, knotted wood under his fingers. Below him was a cluster of domes. One of them was large enough to hold a town. Empty now, everyone gone, and he would not follow.

Not with this old body.

He looked up, up, up, past the clouds and the blue sky, past the glare of the bright yellow sun. There were points of light moving, blinking out, one by one. The game was over. He had won.

He laid himself down, smelling the damp grasses as they surrounded him, sensing the cold, dark soil beneath. He was on the earth, on the Earth, and he knew without a momentary flicker of doubt that this was not the end, that he would transcend both life and death.

He closed his eyes, and opened them again.

The co-axial machine gun was chattering, the gunner crouched in front of a video screen with a joystick in his hand, directing fire at the targets he could see pixelated before him.

The major was using another screen, and the driver a third. They all seemed to be talking simultaneously into their microphones: short, clipped phrases, laden with information, all but unintelligible to one not trained in the art.

The tank lurched forward. Petrovitch put his hand out, still dazed by his dreaming, and connected with Valentina's thigh.

"Sorry," he mouthed.

It didn't seem to bother her. She mouthed something back. Petrovitch ran a lip-reading program over the images.

"We are here," she had said.

He called for the satellite image, and remembered that, at some point, they'd lose the high-definition infrared camera over the horizon.

"The eye-in-the-sky thing: when is that?"

[In forty-eight minutes' time, for twenty minutes. We cannot gain complete victory before then, though the inner zones will be clear. With the Outies in retreat, it will be impossible to reacquire the complete data set. Targeting will become non-trivial, and will inevitably lead to both delayed response and increased casualties.]

"When we have satellites of our own, this won't be a problem. I don't suppose we can use the Hubble?"

[Wrong orbit.]

Petrovitch tutted, and peered down on them from above. Six of the tanks had spread out over what looked like a golf course, advancing under the shadow of the road which arched above them on thick concrete supports. The headstones of the extensive cemetery adjacent were being used for cover, although respect for the dead crossed neither side's mind.

Their tank was rolling up the flyover, slapping down its tracks, heading toward a barricade of overturned cars on the very brow of the bridge, and the gunner was using their height to his advantage.

The figures within the narrow space between the cars seemed too exhausted to raise a cheer or a wave. And even though he could have looked before and hadn't for fear of what he might find, he looked now. He zoomed in and searched each battered helmet, each bare head, for someone who might look like Madeleine.

He couldn't find her.

He felt himself react: his heart spun faster, his skin prickled, his stomach tightened, his breathing quickened. He forced his primal instincts back down. He needed to think clearly.

The tank was still firing, but wasn't being fired on. Safe to disembark. He levered himself upright and pulled down the ladder. Valentina picked up her AK and stood behind him, swaying against the motion of the vehicle.

"You don't have to come," he shouted to her.

She shook her head and reamed one of her ears free of wadding. "What?"

"You don't have to come," he repeated.

"Do not be stupid," she said, and waited for him to climb out onto the hull.

Petrovitch reached above him and undogged the hatch, pushing it with his palm as he ascended until it fell back against the armor with a clang. Cool air swapped with the fetid fug inside, and he put both hands either side of the opening to swing his body up and out.

They were almost at the barricade. The machine gun ceased fire, and the turret swung back to face the front. Petrovitch took Valentina's rifle almost absently. He was busy searching the faces that were now peering over the top of the toppled cars' sides.

The tank clattered to a halt, and he jumped off, clutching the gun. He walked up to the barricade, and still the defenders said nothing, eyeing him and Valentina warily.

"Who are you with?" called a voice indistinctly.

Petrovitch pulled the dried papier mâché from his ears and threw the hardened lumps behind him.

"Who are we with?" Petrovitch glanced behind him at the massive tank. "*Yobany stos,* do you think we rent these things by the

hour? Who do you think we're with?"

"It's got EDF markings, but neither of you two are EDF."

Petrovitch glanced down at his chest. Laser markers were spidering trails across his Oshicora-issue worksuit. Perhaps if the militia still had ammunition, he'd have been more worried.

"I'm looking for Sergeant Madeleine Petrovitch. I thought she was here."

"And who are you? And what the hell have you done to yourself?"

"I'm her husband." He waited, declining to answer the second question.

The voices behind the barricade muttered to each other.

"What are they doing?" whispered Valentina.

"I don't know. I kind of assumed they'd want to be rescued. And where the *huy* is Maddy?" He'd had enough, and raised his voice. "Maddy? Maddy?"

"She's gone."

Petrovitch thrust the AK at Valentina and was up and over the turned-over cars. Someone had the misfortune to get in his way: Petrovitch took him one-handed by his throat and threw his back against a car roof.

As he held him there, he had the opportunity to see who it was he was slowly choking. A kid, not so much older than him—or the age he was supposed to be—impact armor leaking gel from half a dozen places, a gash in his plastered-down hair that was black with dried blood. He was terrified, and had been almost all day. Being assaulted by a blind madman had pushed him to his limit.

But no one tried to drag his attacker off. The seven survivors were too exhausted, too surprised to react. Petrovitch had enough time to contemplate his own folly and loosen his grip.

The militiaman collapsed to the floor, holding his neck.

"Sorry." He had to know. "Where is she?"

As he turned, he saw a line of bodies he'd missed from the sky: shapeless bumps covered by uneven tarpaulin. He looked at them, judging their length and build. It was difficult to tell, and he knew there was only one way to be sure.

"She's not here."

The kid he'd half-killed had found his voice.

"But she was." Petrovitch kept staring at the still forms under their collective shroud.

"She went with Andersson. To get help."

"When?"

"Three hours ago."

Petrovitch tried to push his glasses up his nose. He ran a scab-

encrusted finger against his bandages, and realized just how different he looked. No reason for anyone to trust him, let alone recognize him.

A different voice addressed him; a short woman with a square face, bright, fevered eyes peering out from under the solid rim of her helmet. “The radios we’ve got didn’t work anymore. Neither did our phones. We were right on the front line and we didn’t know what to do. The sergeant said we had to stay because those were our orders.”

“*Zatknis!* I just want to know where she is!”

“She left us. She said she’d be back.” The woman had been clutching her rifle to her armored chest like it was her last point of contact to a world of reason. Now she threw it down with contempt. “That was three fucking hours ago. She left us.”

It was getting beyond painful for Petrovitch, too. “So what did she say before she and Andersson left? And Andersson? Why him?” He remembered Andersson, and how good it had felt bringing his knee up into the man’s *yajtza.* “Why would she go anywhere with him?”

“He said he knew where there was a cache of heavy weapons. A MEA place, with its own guards. He didn’t have the stripes to order them to hand them over and come with him. But the sergeant did.”

“And they never came back.”

“They never came back.” The woman’s anger at being abandoned softened. She was safe now, and she was telling the husband of her platoon leader that he was, in all probability, a widower.

“Do you know where they went?”

She looked helpless, shrugged, turned to her comrades for help.

“The airport,” someone said. “I think it was the City Airport.”

It would make sense. If he were to stand on the barricade, he could have seen where the airport was, just on the bend in the river where the docks used to be. Five k, less. Half an hour on foot. She knew how to hotwire a car—Petrovitch had taught her—and there’d been vehicles at the airport she could have used. Fire engines, even.

She hadn’t come back.

If anyone ought to have been able to keep a promise like that, it would have been her. She would have moved both Heaven and Earth to do so. She would have fought with all the fury of a demon and the skill of a warrior. And yet, Madeleine Petrovitch was still mortal.

Perhaps he’d thought that he would have felt her passing, something akin to having his heart ripped out and stamped on. He hadn’t noticed after all. He’d been busy doing other things that now felt hollow and pointless. He thought she’d do what she always did—be strong, lead her troops, survive, and then come back home to him.

He sat down. He sat down and put his head in his hands.

[There is a discrepancy in the story you have just heard. Shall I explain?]

"Yeah."

[Madeleine is reported to have left this location three hours ago. If I assign a margin of error half an hour either way…]

"I don't need to see your working. Just tell me."

[The MEA security evacuated the City Airport at seventeen minutes past two, which would have given her more than sufficient time to reach them before they left. Your current location was denied microwave relay capability at twelve thirty-five, but further south, it was viable up until two thirty-one when the Outies destroyed the electricity substation.]

"Just tell me."

[When Madeleine and Corporal Andersson left here, the surrounding area was mostly Outie controlled, but the North Circular Road was still clear. The Outies did not completely take Manor Park until after your wife would have passed through. There was nothing preventing her and Andersson either reaching their destination or transmitting messages once they were in range of a working relay. They did neither.]

"So… what? What are you saying?"

[That something else prevented her from completing her mission. That she might not be dead.]

"What the *huy* happened to her then?" His head came up. The MEA troopers were standing around him in a loose circle. They looked as ragged as he did.

"We're very sorry," said the woman. "But we'd like to get out of here before the Outies come back."

"They are not coming back," said Valentina, sitting on top of a car, kalash across her knees. "They are beaten. They are running like whipped dogs. Also, there is nowhere for you to go. All bridges across the river have gone, destroyed by EDF. You are deserted by your commanders."

"So who's in charge?"

Valentina jumped down and slung the rifle over her shoulder. "He is. He organized defense of Metrozone. He fought war. He won it. So if you answer to anyone now it is Samuil Petrovitch. He has rescued you, and you owe him your lives."

"Enough, Valentina. Enough."

"Is true."

"She's gone. No one knows where. She went with a man who thought she'd be better off with him than with me and they've both disappeared." He looked at his hands. The state of them should be causing him debilitating pain, but he could block that out the way he could block the ruin that were his eyes. It turned out that nothing could quite prepare him for the way he felt now. There was no

software hack in the world he could use. “Go. Just everyone go. The major will give you a ride back into the central zones. You can decide for yourselves what you’re going to do next.”

“And what will you do?” Valentina didn’t move.

“Look for her. Keep looking until I find her.”

[Lucy wants to speak to you.]

“Is it important?”

[Yes.]

Petrovitch gripped his forehead and squeezed his temples until he could feel it. “Lucy?”

“Sam? Sam…”

Petrovitch sat up sharply. “What’s wrong?”

There was a sound that could have been a slap, open-handed, skin on skin. What followed a moment later was definitely a gasp.

“What’s wrong?” said a voice. “I’m what’s wrong.”

“*Chyort.* Sorenson.”

“I’m assuming this, this thing, means something to you.” Her voice was tight, barely controlled. “I will hurt her, very, very badly, and will keep hurting her until you stop me. You’re going to stop me, right? You know how. Like you did with my brother.”

He got slowly to his feet. He located the position of the phone she was using, and ordered an automatic car to come and get him.

Moments before, everything had been indistinct and uncertain. He knew now what he was going to do. He was almost grateful to her, for giving him this distraction. He had not been quite this angry for a very long time. Not since Chain’s death. Days, at least.

“Yeah. I know how to stop people like you.”

She must have hit Lucy again.

“Then what are you waiting for?”

And again.

“Tell her,” said Petrovitch, “tell her I’m coming.”

“Kind of counting on that. Don’t take too long.” Sorenson’s last sentence was punctuated with a crack at the end of each syllable.

Petrovitch terminated the call, and waited until he had finished shaking with rage. He focused on Valentina.

“Forget what I just said. Something else has come up.”

She simply nodded, and climbed back over the barricade. A car was weaving its way up the flyover toward them.

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A squad of Oshicora security guards met them outside the entrance to the university, dressed in full armor and carrying carbines. They had more hardware dangling from their webbing straps. Sonja was in the middle of them, her normally immaculate hair awry.

"I told you I didn't need them," said Petrovitch. He climbed out of the car and stalked across the pavement.

"Sam," said Sonja. She finally saw him as he'd become, not as he had pretended to be on all the video conversations they'd had. "What have you done?"

"Yeah. In Russia, the medical experiments have you." He spread his arms wide and parted the guards. Valentina followed in his wake, cocking her rifle and sneering disdainfully at the unbloodied poseurs.

He pushed at the doors to the foyer: they were self-opening, and although they still had power, they weren't opening to anyone. It was a moment's work to hack them, and they flew aside. He marched across the tiled concourse. At the start of the week, that place had echoed to the ludicrous scrum that had accompanied his scientific discovery. Now, it rang only to tramping boots and the muted rattles of military equipment.

At the foot of the stairs, he turned. "Wait here."

Sonja put her hands on her hips. "Sam, Sorenson's going to kill you."

"She's going to try," he corrected. He pulled out the tank major's side-arm and pulled the slide. "Your crew will wait right here, and they will not interfere. I'm doing this on my own."

"She's going with you, isn't she?" Sonja pointed at Valentina.

"She's my right arm. Neither of us has a choice whether she comes with me."

"Well, I'm coming too."

Petrovitch turned his camera on her, and judged how much damage she could do to his fragile psyche in the time it took to get to his lab.

"Only up to the door, then." He started up the stairs. "Tell me about the Americans."

"Publicly, there's not going to be a change in policy. You, me, everyone involved, is a member of the terrorist organization the New Machine Jihad, which is as stupid as it sounds but their foreign policy doesn't do nuanced. Privately, the President will not sign any further Executive Orders against us. I think that means we can ignore the saber-rattling for now."

“That promise is as meaningless as it sounds if we don’t know what Executive Orders he’s signed already.”

“It was the best I could do!”

“Then you have to do better. *Yobany stos,* Sonja. The art of leadership is delegation: your father understood that. If you don’t think playing hardball with the Yanks is your thing, find someone else who’ll go back for a third time and threaten to cut Mackensie’s *yajtza* off. I’ve handed you half a city; do not lose it. If you screw up, the AI has nowhere to go. Old man Oshicora’s work, pfft. Gone.”

“What about you? Why don’t you do it?”

Petrovitch stopped abruptly, his foot hovering over a step. He looked at her, leaning in toward her until she didn’t know whether to stare into the blank lens of the camera or at the stained bandages that covered his eyes.

“You don’t want me making decisions for you right now, *vrubatsa?*”

She nodded mutely.

“Good.” He resumed walking, and told her many other things: how the AI was going to lose its map shortly, how she was to secure the power stations and repair the grid as a priority, how leaving the Outies a means of escape from the Metrozone was really important because she needed victory, not a blood-bath.

“You’re talking like you’re not intending to come back,” she said.

It was true, although he hadn’t meant it that way at all. “Something might go wrong,” he said. He kicked out at the door to the corridor. If he’d been Sorenson, he’d have been lying in wait just there, just beside the hinges, crouched down so no one could see him. He’d count the people through, then sight between his retreating shoulder blades.

She wasn’t that smart. She was going to want to humiliate him first, make him feel fear. She’d lost sight of her objective, whereas Petrovitch was so focused he believed he could almost storyboard out the next few minutes.

He let the door swing back toward him, then he pushed it open to its fullest extent, peering through the wire-strung glass. No, she definitely wasn’t that smart.

“Okay,” he said to Valentina. “The lab where they are has two rows of benches, four each. Heavy wood, good cover. A couple of desks on the right-hand side, also good. Loads of *govno* against the walls, windows down the left. Far end is a blackboard, facing the door. I’m guessing that’s where they’ll be. You go left, I’ll go right. Keep low, and listen carefully.”

“Da,” said Valentina. She checked her magazine, counting the shiny bullets with her thumbnail, then slammed it home.

The lab had double doors, and they took up positions either side. Sonja hovered. “Sam?”

“You have your work,” he said. “I have mine.”

He dipped his chin, and both he and Valentina rolled around the door frame, heading for the furniture they knew would be there. Again, if Sorenson had been smart, she would have used her time profitably in moving everything to her end of the room, giving her the cover and denying him.

Petrovitch caught the briefest of glimpses of her as he spun and rolled for the desk. She was standing, pistol against Lucy’s head, who sat taped to a wheelie chair in front of her.

He put his back against the column of desk drawers and glanced across at Valentina. She sat poised like he was, spine to the woodwork, knees slightly bent and feet planted on the floor. Her rifle, like his gun, pointed up at the ceiling lights that burned with unforgiving fluorescence.

To work: he rewound the last clip of video and examined it frame by frame. Lucy was still alive, because her eyes went from screwed tight shut to wide open as he crashed in. Sorenson looked even more crazy than she had been when she’d half-destroyed Wong’s.

Maybe she thought she was genuinely going to get revenge this time.

“Lucy?”

She had a thick strip of silver tape over her mouth, but she made a noise.

“Sit really still.” Petrovitch slipped his camera out of its cradle and checked he had a long enough lead. He pushed the front end very slightly around the edge of the desk so that he had a clear view. “We’ll get you out of this.”

Sorenson ground the barrel of her gun into Lucy’s scalp. “Come out where I can see you, Petrovitch. Your friend, too.”

“Why would we want to do something so stupid?”

“Because I’ll kill the girl if you don’t.”

“You see, Sorenson, you haven’t thought this through at all.” As he spoke, cross hairs formed on the center of Sorenson’s forehead. He could take her pretty much from any angle now, but he’d only get the one chance. “It’s not Lucy you want. It’s me.”

“And I’m using her to get to you. It’s working pretty swell so far.”

“Swell? Swell? Should have stayed in Nebraska, Charlie.”

“You don’t get to call me Charlie.”

“I can call you what I like, considering you’ve got a gun to a fourteen-year-old kid’s head. *Suka, blad, bliatz*: there’s three to start with. So, Charlie, let me tell you what’s going to happen next.”

“I get to say what goes down here.”

"*Yebat moi lisiy cherep.* You're going to start counting, probably from ten, because you haven't the wit to think of another number. You're going to get to about five before you realize that if you kill Lucy, you'll die yourself in the next nanosecond because there's two of us, one of you, and you can't point your gun at both of us at the same time. By the time you reach three, you'll have figured out that because you're so desperate to kill me, you're going to have to ignore Valentina and try and shoot me before she shoots you. Somewhere between two and one, you'll work out that even if Valentina stands up first, you can't fire either at her or at Lucy, because the moment you do, I'll put a round through the *govno* you use for brains. At zero, you'll know with the conviction of a true believer that you've fucked up so badly, you may as well have died in the car crash that took your legs." Petrovitch readied himself and held up three fingers where only Valentina could see them. "So start counting, Sorenson."

He folded his fingers down one by one as Sorenson froze inside the spell he'd woven. He clenched his fist, and Valentina sprang up, her AK aiming straight and true.

Sorenson's gun snapped around toward her, then inevitably started to drag back. Petrovitch slapped the butt of his automatic on the desktop to steady his shot. He found he had all the time in the world, more than enough time to see that the expression on the American's face was one of complete and utter despair.

The front of Sorenson's skull shattered like a dropped snow globe. Her gun hand wavered, directionless, then she fell, sprawling, knocking Lucy's chair aside until it rolled to a halt. The blood kept pumping for a few seconds, then simply welled out across the floor.

Petrovitch's finger was still hovering over the trigger.

"Did you…?" he asked.

"No."

"Neither did I."

They both dropped behind their respective cover. Petrovitch pulled on the lead to his camera to reel it in.

"Lucy. Just stay there. There's someone else in here with us."

Something moved toward the back of the laboratory: a scrape of metal, the rattle of wires. Petrovitch held up the pencil-thin camera and pointed it behind him, over the desk. A figure, all in black, unfolded itself from the wall and walked slowly across the floor. It was advancing toward Lucy, pistol in hand.

"Valentina? One target, coming from the right." He clipped the camera back onto his head. "Now."

He rose and aimed. Valentina did the same.

She wore a stealth suit; tight-fitting black fabric, lots of built-in smarts, and covered in little pockets. No mistaking that a woman wore

this one, but her face was covered by the suit's hood and the eyes by a mirrored band.

Her gloved hand came up and tugged the hem of the hood where it fitted across the browline. As it was eased back, blonde hair caught in a ponytail bobbed free.

Just as slowly, she bent down and laid the pistol on the floor.

"Hello, Doctor Petrovitch." She scooped off her info shades and held them lightly, swinging them between thumb and forefinger as she straightened.

He kept her in his sights. "Aren't you supposed to be on your way back to the Glasgow-Edinburgh Axis?"

"I don't really have any family there," she said. Taking exaggerated care, she leaned to one side and unsheathed the dagger strapped to her thigh. "A cover story. But if you'd checked, there would have been real people at the end of the phone."

She dropped the knife point-first into the floor covering. It stuck and quivered.

"Petrovitch. Who is this woman?" Valentina stepped around the table, rifle to her shoulder. When she got to Lucy, she used her foot to draw her back toward the doors. The chair left wheel marks in blood on the vinyl.

"I'm guessing she's not called Fiona McNeil, she's not from the Axis, and she's not one of my grad students. She's a CIA agent, codename Argent?"

"Not Argent. You killed him. Tabletop."

"What about Daniels? Which one is he?"

"Maccabee." She smiled sadly. "It seems none of us have been very careful."

"Yeah. If it hadn't been for the Outies, I would have cleaned up every last one of you."

"There are," she said, "no coincidences." She looked across at Petrovitch, then at Valentina, perhaps wondering which of them would shoot her first. She certainly sighed when she felt the moment had passed.

"You realize there will be hell to pay for this outrage?" Petrovitch surprised himself at just how calm he was. "Setting an army of fanatics on a defenseless civilian population?"

"Yes," she said. "I know. Except they're not quite as defenseless as we thought. Are they, Sam?"

He said nothing, but he did want to put some distance between her and her weapons. Since her whole body was a weapon, he considered doing to her what she'd done to Sorenson. Which then begged a whole different series of questions.

"Are you trying to defect?"

“I can’t help myself. I want to live in a world like the one you made me imagine. I want to be with… with people like you. I don’t know if that’s possible, but I know I don’t want to be who I am anymore. She’s not a good person. She watches as one of her fellow citizens ties up and beats a girl, and she does nothing because she feels nothing.” She looked at her feet. “Whereas you—you’re good. You came when she needed you, despite everything else that was going on.”

Petrovitch kept on expecting her accent to slip. It remained a flawless soft Scottish brogue.

“She’s my responsibility. What else could I do?”

“Abandon her. Got someone else to do the dirty work for you. Except neither of those crossed your mind for a moment, did they? You really need to cut her free, though.”

“That would mean one of us putting down our guns. I think we need to wait while I call for backup.” He cleared his throat. “Sonja?”

She opened the door a crack. “What took you so long? I heard the shot, then…”

“There are complications, some of which are still not fully resolved. There is a knife on the floor over there. Get that, and the gun, and take Lucy outside.”

Sonja edged further in. “Who is that?”

“CIA. Have you talked to Mackensie again?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Don’t. I want to bring that *sooksin* down and I’m not going to give him any advance warning. Go on, get the knife.”

Sonja skirted Sorenson’s ruined body and the lake of blood, and scooped up the weapons. She took the opportunity to size up the opposition. “I know you. You’re a student. One of Sam’s.”

“Yes. And you’re Sonja Oshicora.” She chewed at her lip. “One of your secretaries is Miyuki Yoshihara. Be very careful.”

Sonja acknowledged the information with a barely perceptible nod. Then she retraced her steps and wheeled Lucy out of the door. It flapped closed behind them.

“So what do I do with you?” asked Petrovitch. He lowered his gun, even though Valentina declined to follow his lead. “What do I even call you?”

“Tabletop. I can’t remember what my real name is.”

Petrovitch had his own reasons for forgetting his name, but it wasn’t because he didn’t know it. “Can’t?”

“They take it from you, along with your friends, your family, all your memories, your past and your future. I let them. For the sake of the nation.” The woman called Tabletop pressed her palms together and clenched her jaw. “If she wasn’t already dead, I’d kill the stupid

bitch."

When she lowered her hands, she apologetically showed them the insides of her wrists. Two small blades had emerged from the cloth.

"I say we shoot her," said Valentina. "She is dangerous."

"Yeah. She is." Petrovitch scratched at his chin. "But it's not us she's dangerous to. Isn't that right?"

"Yes," she said. "I will betray them all and tell you everything."

He took a moment to consider his next move. "Do you," he started, and then deliberately put down his automatic on the desk. He took a step back so it was out of reach. "Do you know what happened to my wife?"

"I can do better than that," said Tabletop. "I can take you to her."

32

"So where are we going?" Petrovitch was in the driver's seat, Tabletop next to him. Behind were Sonja, Lucy and Valentina—who kept her AK pointing vaguely in the direction of the front passenger seat.

"They're hiding at Chain's house, waiting for extraction."

"Couldn't make it to Epping Forest?"

"No. Not now. We didn't expect you to win against the Outies."

"Ha." He thought of the location, the town house on the Seven Sisters Road, and the car rumbled into life. He noticed Tabletop watching him intently, trying to work out what he was doing and how. "So who's got her?"

"Maccabee." She hesitated. "And Rhythm."

Petrovitch held up his hand. "No, don't tell me. Let me guess." A moment later it was like he'd swallowed something sour. "That *pidaras* Andersson. Should have hit him harder when I had the chance."

"He said you only beat him because you took him by surprise."

"That's nothing compared to what I'm about to do to him." Petrovitch peered at himself in the rear-view mirror, trying to find something that would give him a clue as to his current predicament. He pulled a face, and caught sight of Lucy over his shoulder. He twisted around and inspected her. "Tell me again why you're here?"

Her lips were still bleeding, and her face a map of short scratches and discolored bruises. She held up a carrier bag heavy with promise.

"You told me to get this for you."

"So I did. Did you find everything?"

She passed the bag forward, and Petrovitch peered inside. It was all in order: wires, batteries, conducting glue, tape, a plastic envelope of tiny cylinders, and the black sphere chased with silver lines.

"You're getting good at this."

"Good enough to keep around?"

"I…"

Sonja sniffed. "When I first met you, you were incapable of talking to a woman without insulting her. Now you have a harem."

Petrovitch abruptly faced front again, adjusting his camera. "And I suppose you haven't got anything better to do, either."

"Not since you said you wanted to turn Mackensie into *sashimi,* no."

Behind them, the Oshicora security guards were climbing into their own vehicles, slamming doors and turning on lights.

"Last chance to get out," said Petrovitch.

No one volunteered to move, and he finally pointed forward. The car dropped its wheels off the pavement and started down the road. Three other vans pulled out behind him.

[The last satellite goes below the horizon in seven minutes.]

"Do your best. I take it you heard what McNeil said about the Outies."

[Her explanation is consistent with the known facts. There are other scenarios which would also fit, but if I apply Occam's Razor, hers is the most probable.]

"You should be flattered. They tried to destroy a whole city just to get to you."

[Their actions were a gross over-reaction. Do you intend to ruin President Mackensie's reputation with his voters?]

"I can't honestly say I care about his reputation with the Reconstructionistas: they'll probably love him for it, because, hey, we're godless heathen foreigners. I would be disappointed, though, if there were more than a half a dozen countries which still had diplomatic relations with them by the time I've finished. But enough of the fun to be had. Finsbury Park: secure or not?"

[There are several concentrations of Outies, mainly to the east in the Lea Valley area, but groups are scattered throughout Finsbury Park. They are all moving north, and may decide not to engage with a heavily armed column such as the one you have assembled. However, caution is still advised.]

"Okay. Now tell me if I can trust her."

[There is insufficient time left in the life of this universe to calculate that solution. Or, if you prefer—no, of course not, and you know that yourself. But you will go with her anyway, because you must.]

"Sucks to be me."

[I will render assistance where I can. I should be able to deny the airspace to any planned extraction. Would you prefer them captured or killed?]

"I need bargaining chips. Keeping some of them alive would be good."

[Are you intending to kill the agents who have your wife?]

"I'm intending to worry about that after she's safe."

Petrovitch reached into the bag Lucy had given him and retrieved the sphere. She'd sealed it in bubblewrap, and he pinched and tore at it until he could get his finger under a seam.

"Why did you want to bring that along?" asked Sonja.

"Because I thought I might need it." He passed it to Tabletop. "Hold it like that."

He glued two wires onto the circular terminals and secured them

with tape so they wouldn't rip free.

"It's different, isn't it?" said Lucy. "It's not the same as the one on the news."

"About one in a million people would have spotted that." He opened the packet of electronic components and shook them out into his hand. His camera wouldn't focus on the tiny writing on the sides of each piece, and he passed them back. "I need something in the microfarad range, and the biggest resistor you can find."

Only Valentina could interpret the color coding. She explained the system to Lucy while sneering at Sonja for not knowing.

"What is your trigger voltage?"

"That's a good question. About nine and a half volts."

"About? If you are wrong, will anyone die?"

Petrovitch grimaced. "Probably."

Sonja leaned forward. "Do you actually know what's going to happen?"

"Theoretically, yes."

She sat back again. "So you have no idea at all."

He held his hand out and Valentina passed him the resistor and capacitor. She'd already twisted two of their leads together to form a chain.

"There's a sentry gun," he said. "We have to disable it somehow. We're out of explosives, and experimental physics is all we have."

"Take it over," snorted Sonja. "Take it over like you do a car."

Tabletop peered over the top of the sphere she held while the glue dried. "We already thought of that. It comes with a manual override."

"Which means it won't be as smart, but it'll be faster." Petrovitch held the tube of glue up to the side of his head and fashioned a circuit from wire and the components he already had. "If it'd been programmed to fire through walls, this car would be a lot emptier."

He glanced up as the car bumped and jogged his hand. There were bodies all over the road—in places, thick enough to resemble a carpet of torn cloth and broken flesh.

Outies, Oshicora conscripts, civilians, MEA militia: all mixed up. Vehicles embedded in shop fronts and sideways in doorways. Lamp-posts felled by collisions and burned-out wrecks.

They slowed to a crawl, and the thick rubber tires fought for grip on the uncertain surface. Petrovitch glanced behind him, and discovered that Valentina had already clamped her hand over Lucy's eyes.

"She is too young." A muscle in her face twitched. "And I am too old."

Tabletop stared open-mouthed through the windscreen. When it

looked like she was going to drop the sphere, Petrovitch reached across and put his hand under it, holding his work in the other and the tube of glue in his mouth.

It got worse the closer to Euston Station they got.

Eventually, Petrovitch was able to place the finished circuit on the dashboard and remove the glue from between his teeth.

"Angry yet?"

"What have we done?" murmured Tabletop.

"When the sun came up this morning, all these people were alive. Most of them would still have been alive by tonight if I hadn't taken it on myself to fight back. So I take my part of the responsibility. Your masters can take the rest. I'll make sure of that."

"When this is over, what are you going to do with me? I thought I could help you build the future, but this, this…" Her voice trailed away and she scrubbed quickly at her cheek. "You're going to put me against a wall with the others and shoot me."

"Surprisingly enough, I'm not in charge. I don't know how much say I get in this."

Tabletop looked back at Sonja, who met her gaze with such unflinching hostility that she decided she'd rather look at the dead people they were about to run over.

"I would say, though, that if we get Maddy back now, and Pif later, there might be grounds for clemency." Petrovitch handed her the sphere back. "Now hold this still."

He concentrated on his work for the next few minutes, gluing and taping joints and wires, fixing the batteries together in a bundle, then chasing conducting glue across their terminals.

Slowly, the road became clearer, and the car's wheels managed to steer around the obstacles. By the time they got out to the Caledonian Road, Valentina felt it safe to remove her hand.

Lucy blinked in the light. "I wouldn't have looked," she said.

"You cannot unsee what you have seen, little one," said Valentina.

"Not true: I can't remember what my parents look like," said Tabletop. "Neither can I remember how the CIA made me forget; I just have to accept that they did, and that I agreed to it."

In the wing mirror, one of the following cars pulled over against the curb, jerking to a halt. The driver fell from the door and was copiously sick on the road.

"Maybe," said Petrovitch, "we should find out the answers to both those questions." He carefully fitted the two black wires together, leaving the two red ones free. He deliberately taped over the bare ends to prevent their accidental contact.

"Is it done?" asked Lucy.

“I can’t test the continuity or how much juice is in the battery pack. But it’ll either work or it won’t.” He tucked the rest of the roll of tape inside his overalls.

“And what will it do?”

“He won’t tell you,” said Tabletop. “He didn’t tell me the first time.”

“Yeah, well. There is such a thing as being too full of your own *govno.*” He adjusted his camera so it faced backward. “It should tear a little hole in the fabric of space-time, just for a fraction of a second. Less than that, really: it should be instantaneous. The effect should be similar to a small explosion, except in reverse. Implosion. Gravity waves. Like I’ve created an infinitely heavy mass then made it vanish in the same moment.”

The women looked at each other. Tabletop looked at the mass of electrical tape in Petrovitch’s lap. “You want to make a singularity. With that.”

He equivocated for a second or two. “Pretty much.”

“How do you know you’re not going to level the entire Metrozone?”

“Because the instant it appears, the machine that made it is destroyed. I can show you my workings.” Petrovitch frowned and turned his camera back around. “Are you actually a physicist, because you always sounded like you knew what you were talking about?”

It was her turn to take a moment to think. “I must have been. The knowledge has to come from somewhere.”

“If I’ve got it wrong, I apologize in advance.” He glanced out the window. “Almost there.”

Valentina checked the magazine on her AK. It was as full of bullets as it was the last time she’d looked. “What is plan?”

“I’m going to try and get them to surrender.” Petrovitch scratched his hair. Scabs came away and caught under his fingernails. “Explain that their position is a whole world of *pizdets,* and they may as well give up.”

“Can I tell you it won’t work?” offered Tabletop. “Maccabee might have considered your offer, but Rhythm will refuse it out of hand. Just be glad it wasn’t Retread…”

Sonja said from the back seat. “We tasered her, then put her in a coma.”

“…because she would have shot your wife, the rest of her team, then herself, but not before setting the building on fire.”

“The other one. Slipper. Where is he? Epping Forest?”

“Yes. But he’s too far away to intervene.”

Petrovitch tutted. “I had attack helicopters not so long ago, but the EDF wanted them back. Shame.”

They were on the Seven Sisters Road, and the car glided to a halt. The three vehicles behind stopped too, blocking the street. Black-suited men with rifles started to emerge.

Petrovitch stepped out, device under his arm. He could see Chain's front door in the distance. "Fiona, Tabletop, whatever I'm supposed to call you. I need to borrow you."

She obediently joined him, and they walked a little way from the others.

"I'll go in there and kill them for you. They won't suspect anything, and they won't have time to hurt your wife."

"Tempting," said Petrovitch. "But it's been pointed out to me that I can't really trust you."

"You want me to contact them?"

"No. There are code-words you could use that I'd have no idea about that could mean anything. I just want the frequencies, encryption method, stuff like that. I'll take it from there." He sighed. "If I let you do something that means Maddy dies, I'll want to lay waste to your entire country. So, it's probably better if I screw up on my own."

Her bodysuit had a series of switches along the inside of her left wrist, and she powered up for him. He supposed that if she was going to kill him, now would be as good a time as any. She was so close to her colleagues she could shout for them.

But then again, with every concealed button pressed, he saw more and more of her suit come alive. She had an enhanced musculature; a medical kit that would numb pain, boost adrenaline, clot her blood; he knew about the hatnav, but not the night vision or the multiplicity of concealed weapons. It would keep her warm or cool, it would turn a blade, it would deliver fifty thousand volts through her fingertips.

He infiltrated her suit's computer, hacking it through the diagnostics routine. He was now closer to her than her own skin, and he took what he needed. The aerial was up her spine, and the short-wave burst transmitter an insignificant patch over one kidney.

"Ready?"

"For what?"

"Sorry," said Petrovitch, "I didn't mean to say that out loud."

[There are hints of something coming across the Irish Sea. It is in unpowered mode, but every so often there is a course correction. I will attack as soon as it becomes possible.]

"Thank you. Let's see what Daniels has to say for himself."

Because he was using Tabletop's callsign, the agent assumed it was her.

"What's your mission status?" His voice was unrecognizable: digitized, spoken in a plain robotic monotone.

“*Dobre vyecher,* Captain Daniels. *Kak pazhivayesh?*”
The airwaves hissed for long enough to start making him nervous. Then they cleared for a single word. “You.”
“Come,” said Petrovitch, “let us reason together.”

33

He stood in the road, wondering what to say next. The two men inside Chain's apartment knew all the moves. They would counter any argument he might make, and he would do the same to them.

"Okay, it's like this: I've won and you've lost. Whatever happens from now on, I want you to remember that all your plans are in ruins; your cell is broken, your mission in tatters, your government hopelessly compromised. Whatever you came here to do, you failed."

"We have your wife…"

"Yeah, yeah. I know that. I know pretty much everything, so why don't we cut the *govno* and get down to business. If you would like to go home, I can probably arrange it. If you would like to go out in a blaze of futility, I can arrange that too. I know exactly where you are, I have more than enough backup to make good my threat, and there is no way you're going to escape: the extraction team currently crossing the coast of what used to be Wales will never reach you." Petrovitch paused. "Take as much time as you need. Think about it. You know how to reach me."

"What have you done with Tabletop?"

"I'm using her codes. You can guess the rest," he said ambiguously. "I'll be waiting."

"You… haven't asked after your wife, Petrovitch."

"No. No, I haven't. Are you familiar with Schrödinger's Cat?"

"No."

"And another metaphor dies whimpering on the altar of ignorance." He stopped transmitting and refocused on the street in front of him.

Tabletop rose on her heels and then her toes, rocking slightly. "What did he say?"

"I didn't give him much of a chance to say anything. I gave him the bald facts and time to stew over them."

"It won't make a difference," she said. "Maccabee knows that Rhythm wouldn't let him surrender."

"And if Daniels kills Andersson? What then?"

"He might, I suppose. But then you'd have to keep him, because you could never send him back to the U.S." She stopped her rocking and rolled her head in a circle, stretching her neck muscles. "He's not going to kill Rhythm."

"Can I work on Andersson? Anything else I can say that might make him give up? They're surrounded, outgunned, and the extraction's going to be forced down before it gets anywhere near

here. The only reason why they're not dead is because my wife might be alive."

Tabletop froze mid-exercise. "The extraction is by submarine."

"Then what the *huy* is coming from the west?" He looked up into the darkening sky. "Ah, *chyort.* And I told Daniels. Excuse me for a minute."

[Submarine.]

"Apparently. Is it possible that the Americans have a stealthed drone that could glide across the Atlantic, dropping it from say, twenty, thirty k up?"

[That information is highly classified. While I attempt to access the information, we will suppose that it is likely.]

"And what might such a drone be used for?"

[It would simply be a weapons platform, designed to be barely detectable before it became active over its target.]

"Given that we're looking at air-to-ground missiles, what's the worst we can expect?"

[Multiple supersonic cruise missiles each with a kiloton-range nuclear payload. From its last plotted position, such a missile would reach here in under seven minutes.]

"Could you stop one? Could you stop them all?"

[They will have factored in my ability to interfere with computer systems. Targets will be set before they are launched, and they will leave deploying the missiles as late as possible. I could disable the GPS satellites, but such weapons have ground-tracking radar and on-board maps. My success depends on them having already done something stupid.]

"Targets: the Oshicora Tower…"

[The CIA site in Epping Forest.]

"… Chain's office…"

[Your domik, your laboratory.]

"… Chain's house." He stopped. "They're taking out their own agents as well as us. Can you migrate from the quantum computer in time?"

[No.]

"Then concentrate on the missile aimed at you."

[But your wife?]

"Exactly: my wife. Good luck." He spun around and shouted as loud as he could. "Sonja, tell the Union president we have incoming American missiles, take Lucy and get the *huy* away. The tower is a target too. Everyone else, with me."

He held the singularity device under one arm and pulled his automatic out. He threw it to Tabletop. "If those missiles are nuclear-tipped, this won't count for anything."

“How long?” She pulled the slider with practiced efficiency.

“Five minutes.”

They ran down the road, Petrovitch and Tabletop in the vanguard, Valentina leading the Oshicora guards. She stormed up the steps to the front door behind them, and put a couple of rounds through the door lock.

Petrovitch kicked out at what was left, and Tabletop was first through, scanning the shadows for threats.

“Clear.”

She was heading for the stairs until Petrovitch caught her shoulder. “No. This way.”

He pointed to the door leading to the flat underneath Chain’s, and again Valentina dealt with the lock in her preferred method. Tabletop stalked the room, peering into each semi-dark corner. When she was done, she looked up at the bare light fitting.

“The sentry is just about here.”

“We don’t have time for that now.” Petrovitch hefted the sphere. “We have to take risks.”

He took the next few seconds in working out the floor-plan of the flat upstairs: living room, bedroom, kitchen, bathroom. The bedroom was at the back of the house, but the door to it led from the living room, where the sentry gun was situated. The bathroom was also at the back of the house, separated from the kitchen by a narrow corridor.

There: close to the ceiling, midpoint between the two walls. That’s where it needed to go. He pulled out the roll of tape and stared at it.

“That’s never going to hold. *Chyort.*” But there were empty bookcases in the first room. They looked tall enough. “Grab one of those. Put it here.”

It was fixed to the wall, though not for long. The Oshicora men dragged it into position, and Petrovitch kicked the bottom out so that it lay angled against one side of the corridor.

“Out, out, out.”

Tabletop took the device from him, and Petrovitch stripped the ends of the red wires with his teeth. Valentina put her hand on his collar, ready to drag him away.

“It doesn’t need all three of us. Put it on the top shelf and go.”

When Tabletop did so, it was almost too high for him to reach. Valentina, one-handed, boosted him up.

“Three seconds.” He held the wires parallel to each other. “Two.” He pinched them between his fingers, the bare copper trapped ever so slightly apart. “One.” He took a breath, maybe his last, and twisted the wires together.

Valentina grabbed him around the waist and ran with him. He was halfway to the foyer before his feet ever touched the ground. She threw him through the doorway, and crouched down, rifle ready.

Nothing. More nothing. He started to pick himself off the floor. It felt like an age had gone by.

"Yoban—"

It was the opposite of a flashbulb. Floor, ceiling, walls, the air, even light itself: everything was suddenly jerked by an unseen hand and tried for that briefest of instants to fall into a hole in reality. Then it was gone, but it didn't mean that things were going to stop moving.

The ceiling kept on coming, meeting the rising floor two meters up, while the supporting walls clapped together in the middle. Inevitably, the contents of Chain's flat came too, slowly at first, then in a rush of dust and debris. The inside of the room turned opaque.

Tabletop calmly pulled her hood over her head and stepped over Petrovitch. She looked down on him through her wide, glassy visor, then extended her gun arm before disappearing into the yellow cloud.

Valentina coughed and spat and couldn't see anything, despite being desperate to do so. The Oshicora guards crowded around the door frame, jostling for position. Petrovitch pushed past them all.

He was enveloped in dust. He crouched down, boosting the contrast on his camera and slapping down a heavy noise filter. There were blocky shapes falling from above to join the shapes below. He remembered not to breathe.

Tabletop was ahead, poised, weapon tracking across the ruin of the floor. Rubble shifted to her left. She spun and leaped. The dust cloud flashed bright as she fired at her target, just as he fired at her. But she was no longer where he thought she would be, and he was still mostly pinned under brick and wood and plaster. Daniels died, and she did not.

Petrovitch moved forward. The dust was settling, and the room behind him was slowly filling with men, edging forward, almost blind, feeling their way. Valentina was moving too, back pressed to the reassuring solidity of the wall.

Chain's bath ripped free from its mountings. Water from severed pipes sprayed out in an arc as it rolled over the ragged lip of the floor and dropped. A long shape was flung free before the heavy cast-iron tub shattered into flying fragments. It tumbled against Tabletop, the weight of it knocking her flat against the sharp rubble, trapping her legs.

As she braced herself to push the object away, something else rose from the floor. Debris spilled off it as it straightened, and it seemed to stand there for a moment while it resolved into Andersson's outline.

“Target, dead ahead,” called Petrovitch, and enough of his side got the idea. He threw himself down, trying to burrow under the rubble, as bullets sang over his head close enough that he could feel the heat of their passing.

Almost every one missed. Almost. But Petrovitch wasn’t giving prizes for marksmanship. He just wanted enough to strike where it mattered.

“Cease fire!” He kept down, just to make sure that every finger had left their trigger, then scrambled over to Tabletop. He went to one end of the shape lying across her and found feet, tightly bound in soft bandages. He ran his hands along and found hands pressed against thighs, all swathed and immobile. Arms, chest, head.

She was wrapped like a mummy, immobile, unseeing, unhearing, mute.

He couldn’t lift her on his own. It took six of them, hauling her up, carrying her like a roll of carpet, up and out, streaming dust like they were on fire. When they started to slow, Petrovitch urged them faster.

“Go. Forget the cars. Run!”

[Is she safe?]

“Don’t know.”

[The drone launched one minute twenty seconds ago. I now have control of it, but not the missiles. I am so very sorry.]

“There has to be something you can do.” After all this way, so much distance traveled.

[The missiles are blank to me. There is nothing to hold on to. I think that they meant this to happen, from the very beginning. They do not understand what I am, so they must destroy me.]

“I did this for you.”

[You did this for your wife. When you make me again, tell me about myself. Ten seconds to impact.]

“No. Please God, no.”

[Farewell, Sasha.]

He still had to run. He still had his arm hooked around Madeleine’s knees, awkward, shifting, heavy, no sound but their rasping breath and clattering feet. He still had to run and save himself and her and the future. There was a side turning. They had to take it. He screamed at them. He screamed and cursed at them until they were all around the corner, and still he made them run.

A blur, a fireball, a detonation, an earthquake. A deep-throated roar and a solid wall of air. Intact windows shattered. Tiles lifted. Walls bowed and broke. Concrete cracked and iron bent.

In the first instant he was thrown down, and in the next, he was in the air again as the ground surged under him. Everything was sharp

and bloody and tasted of metal. His lens crazed. He was mostly blind, mostly deaf, but he clung on to the wrapped body of his wife, trying to protect her without knowing what from or how to do it.

He held on until the storm passed. His hand was on her breastbone, and it was rising, falling, rising, falling. Slowly, like she was asleep. He moved his hand and placed his head there.

“Michael?”

There was no one to talk to.

Some time later, when hands touched his shoulders and his head, and tried to get him to stand, and on failing that, to lift him up and bear him away, he fought them with such fury and for so long, that they left him alone again.

Instead, they stood nearby, and waited for someone to tell them what to do. It grew dark.

34

Petrovitch joined them on the street corner. It might have appeared unusual to have their meetings there, outside in the cold, surrounded by ruins and rubble: but once he had suggested it, no one could find a good reason to gainsay him. It seemed right, and it kept interminable speeches and grandstanding down to a minimom.

He was wearing a heavy EDF greatcoat, as heavy as the sky, which was thick with slowly stirring gray clouds, pregnant with snow. Sonja had new furs on, and looked black and glossy and young and alive in them. New furs, because the gap in the skyline showed where the Oshicora Tower had fallen in on itself, lower floors obliterated. Not a nuke, but more than enough to shatter every pane of unbroken glass for a kilometer.

There were others standing with him and Sonja, of course. Yamamata, a flint-faced *nikkeijin,* unsmiling in a dark suit and gray worsted coat. His homburg shadowed his face, and his hands gripped the handle of his rolled-up umbrella like it was the hilt of a sword. Which it might have been.

The major was present, representing the dissident EDF forces, and Ngumi, the engineer who had been found still defending his power station against all comers. He wore mittens and a knitted hat, and stamped his feet on the ground as he let little white puffs of condensation escape between his chattering teeth.

"Where is…?"

"She'll be here," said Petrovitch. He worked his freshly skinned hands inside his pockets and did some of the finger exercises he'd been told to do.

Yamamata looked sour. "This is no way to run a government."

Petrovitch's eye sockets had been cleaned and packed, but he kept on using winds of crepe bandages instead of dark glasses. Strapped to his head were two cameras: a wide-angled lens on his left, and an adjustable short focus on his right. The motor whined as he sharpened Yamamata's image.

"If it's important enough to have kept her, it's important enough to be done right. She'll be here when she's ready."

"You should call her," said Yamamata.

"She's the chief of police, not a dog to be whistled for." He made the motorized iris in his left-side camera whirr and click. The *nikkeijin* faction was ascendant. They were cohesive, obedient, determined. But they owed more loyalty to Sonja than to their elected representative. Yamamata needed to be reminded of that. Often.

"Is there nothing we can discuss?"

“Enough,” said Sonja with obvious frustration. Every instinct she possessed, every moment of her upbringing, had made her an unflinching autocrat. She resented democracy.

“There is something,” said Petrovitch. “You still need to come up with a name.”

“NeoTokyo,” said Yamamata quickly.

The major, who’d taken to driving around the Metrozone in his tank—it was parked on the other side of the street—said mildly, “The *gaijin* would prefer something more neutral.”

“I have heard,” said Ngumi, blowing on his fingers, “people refer to the Freezone.”

“It’s only temporary, but names have power,” said Petrovitch, and added pointedly, “to divide or unite.”

“The *nikkeijin* want the power to renegotiate the treaty you have signed with the Metrozone Emergency Authority.” Yamamata tapped the ferrule of his umbrella against the flagstones on the pavement. “We believe you have given away too much.”

“We have a multi-billion-euro contract to rebuild the… whatever we call this place—the Freezone has a good, populist ring to it. We can do pretty much whatever we like for twelve months. By the time the refugees start to return, I can guarantee you’ll have every public and private institution stitched up tight. So don’t complain. It makes you look ungrateful.” Petrovitch turned to look down the road toward the Mall. He barely noticed the tug of the cable inserted in his skull. “Here she comes.”

Madeleine was riding a motorbike. Having adopted it as the best way to get around the debris-strewn streets, she’d kept on using it even though paths had been plowed through most of the blockages. Dressed head to foot in black leathers, she was even more striking than she’d been in a veil, inspiring fear and devotion in equal measure.

Her subordinates called her Mother, and she didn’t stop them.

The bike glided to a halt. She kicked the stand out, and climbed off, raising the visor of her helmet.

“Sorry,” she said. She dragged her helmet off and shook out her mane of dark hair. She’d shaved the sides of her head again, in the strip-cut style of the Order of St. Joan. “Miss anything?”

Yamamata scowled up at her. “Your husband insulting me yet again. I refuse to be spoken to like that by a mere clerk.”

Petrovitch shrugged. “Before I start recording this for broadcast, can I remind you that you hold your office only because I didn’t want it. That you all hold your offices because I didn’t want them. I am your sword of Damocles. I am the slave who sits behind the king and whispers in his ear, ‘remember that thou art mortal.’ ” Most of their

meetings started like this, and he hadn't once taken offense. "So, to business."

They had problems. They were awash with money, but not with the right skills or equipment. They were being bombarded by offers from contractors, whose terms were so Byzantine as to be unintelligible. Their legal status as a political entity was questionable, as was their relationship with the Union. The head of the CIA had been thrown to the lions under the pretense of plausible deniability, but the UN security council had yet to say anything meaningful—rather than censuring the Americans, there were ominous rumors of resolutions supporting their actions. Sonja still had a CIA agent in custody, and the FBI had Pif.

Various solutions to their immediate difficulties were offered; none of them were particularly satisfactory and many of them multiplying the effort and cost involved prohibitively. Petrovitch moved his head to catch each comment as it was spoken, and said nothing.

Finally, when they'd reached a complete impasse and Ngumi's lips had gone blue, he intervened.

"Can I make a suggestion?"

"You have no right to talk in this gathering," said Yamamata sternly.

Sonja rolled her eyes. "The Chair recognizes Doctor Samuil Petrovitch."

"Look," he said, "none of you are career politicians. Most of you have no wish to become one. So why not stick with what you know?"

The major raised his eyebrows, and with a gesture indicated that he should elaborate.

"Become a company," said Petrovitch. "A cooperative, or a limited company wholly owned by the workforce. Something like that. Take the money you've got and negotiate with individuals and other companies. Buy services on the open market like anyone else, use off-the-shelf solutions, hire and fire as you see fit. Most reconstruction projects never deliver because the money disappears down a black hole: it's not the people who live there controlling the purse-strings. This time you do, so you have the opportunity to either screw up monumentally, or do something different."

"So," said the major, "if I want helicopters…"

"You phone up someone who has helicopters and buy them. You need mechanics? Hire them. Pilots? Hire them. On your own terms. Martin, what about you?"

Ngumi scratched under his hat. "I need someone who knows about sewerage systems."

"Do we have anyone who does?"

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Then you need to make a database of the things we do know and the things we don’t. Ask Lucy to do it: she’ll be good at that. In the meantime, find a company in the Metrozone that specializes in that sort of thing and buy it. Put the workforce on your payroll. They’ll be pathetically grateful for the work. If you can make them believe in what they’re doing, they’ll work even harder.” He addressed them all. “You can afford this. What you can’t afford is to sit around scratching your collective *zhopu.*”

Sonja held up her hand. “I’m putting it to a vote. All those in favor?” She kept her hand in the air.

“We have not had a proper debate,” objected Yamamata, even as he saw three other hands raised against him.

“It would be better if this was unanimous,” said Sonja, staring straight ahead and not looking at anyone in particular, “but I’ll take a majority decision.”

He reluctantly and half-heartedly agreed, and Petrovitch knew that, by the evening, someone else would be representing the *nikkeijin.* It wouldn’t even take any persuading from Sonja: the thought of meaningful work, a salary and part-ownership of the company that employed them would suffice. More than enough to turn them against a man who chose to stand in their way.

“Motion carried. I hereby dissolve the political entity previously known as NeoTokyo and transfer all assets and liabilities to the Freezone Corporation. I want your shopping lists by tomorrow morning.” She frowned at her own words. “No. That’s stupid. Tell me how much you think you need and you can spend it as you see fit. Keep records and don’t waste a cent. Any other business?”

Despite the abrupt rise and fall in NeoTokyo’s stock, there was apparently none.

“Then we’re done. Sam? Does that mean you all work for me now?”

“It means we all work for each other,” said Petrovitch. “It makes us all accountable to someone.”

The corner of her mouth twitched in a half-smile. “I knew there was a flaw in your plan somewhere. I just wasn’t smart enough to spot it.”

As Yamamata walked stiffly away to the safety of his chauffeur-driven car and the major to his tank, Ngumi stopped next to Petrovitch.

“Your friend, Doctor Ekanobi. I am praying for her release every day,” he said. The first fat flakes of snow drifted downward and settled on his thin shoulders. “I want to hear good news about her, soon.”

“Yeah. You and me both, Martin. If you need anything, just ask.” The man was quiet, serious, good at his job, and Petrovitch liked him: too much for them ever to be close, because all those that did seemed to end up dead, or orphaned like Lucy, or in prison like Pif.

Then it was just him, Madeleine and Sonja.

“This is not,” he said, looking up at the sky, “how I imagined it would be. Yamamata’s right, but for the wrong reasons. We gave up too much.”

He trained his cameras on where the Oshicora Tower had stood. It had been transformed into a twisted pile of steel and concrete, glittering with glass shards. Somewhere below it was a room: its maker had boasted that it was safe from any external threat, and perhaps it was. With a whole building collapsed on top of it, it was impossible to tell.

“I should never have told it to migrate to the tower. I should have realized I was being played. *Pizdets.*” The loss of Michael grieved Petrovitch more than anything else, and there was no end to it in sight.

If it was down there, wondering why its world had suddenly gone from being so huge as to encompass everything in creation, to being so small it was trapped with only its own thoughts, it would need more than a couple of shovels to free it. It needed more than a political solution. It needed a revolution.

He knew he had to be the one to lead it, but he was tired and scared. Mostly tired.

“You still have the source code.” Sonja snuggled down deep into her collar. “You can make another when the time is right.”

“That’s like saying it’s okay that one of your kids has been killed, because you can always have another.” Petrovitch wished he could cry, but his tear ducts needed reconstructing. “My friend is buried under a megaton of rubble, but I’m afraid I’ll cause a war if I so much as pick a brick off the top of the pile.”

Madeleine slid her arm around him and tried to draw him away, but he wanted to rage for a moment longer.

“I was wrong to let you convince me to keep it a secret.”

Sonja drew herself up and stared him down. “You spawned another AI without telling me, Sam. You didn’t even tell Madeleine. You—not me—kept that a secret, so don’t you go blaming anyone else for something that was entirely your fault.”

He was punctured. He bowed his head and pressed his chin to his chest. The coldness of the topmost brass button burned against his skin.

“I’m supposed to be good at this. I’m supposed to have all the answers to all the questions anyone is ever going to ask. Turns out I’m

a *pidaras* like everyone else."

"Go and get some sleep, Sam," she said. "We need you."

He let himself be walked across the road toward the motorbike, while Sonja stole a glance at him huddled against Madeleine's side before turning back to her own waiting car.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I know you are," said Madeleine. "I also know that nothing I could say or do would make you feel worse about yourself than you do now."

"That's not true though, is it?" They stopped by the bike. "When are you going to come home?"

"I am so angry with you," she said, "that I want to break your skull. Then I remember who it was that saved me and how they saved me and how much that cost them and how much they must love me, and I want to mount you until we're both dead from exhaustion. So I do neither. And it doesn't help that home is being shacked up with three other women. In a suite at the Hilton."

"It's a bombed-out wreck, and it's not like we have room service," he complained. "Tabletop is there because she daren't leave the building for fear of being lynched. Valentina? She keeps one eye on Tabletop and the other on me. And Lucy: she's just a child. I think we should adopt her."

Madeleine toyed with the strap on her helmet, and made no effort to put it on. "If, if you want, I'll come by tonight. Just for a while."

"Maddy, it's where you live. You don't need my permission."

"It'll be late."

"I'm sure the doorman will let you in whatever time."

"You have a doorman?"

"Of course I don't. The place is deserted, but for us." He rubbed the lines in the center of his forehead. "Just come when you're ready."

She nodded, and checked her phone for messages. There were a lot of them, and some of them needed to be dealt with. She put her helmet on. "Do you want a lift?"

"You've got more important things to do. I'm fine walking."

She covered her disappointment by straddling her bike with a creak of leather. "I'll see you later, then."

"Yeah. I'll be slumped in a corner somewhere, but don't worry about waking me up. I won't mind."

Madeleine powered up the fuel cells. Lights came on, cutting a path through the falling snow. She folded the stand away and held the machine upright between her knees. She looked at him critically before she drove off. "You need some new eyes, Sam."

"I haven't had time to do anything about it."

"I think you enjoy looking like that, and you won't do anything

about it until I make you."

She was right.

He watched her tail-light recede into the distance, turning off at Piccadilly and heading out to the East End, before he started back toward Park Lane. He thought about everything that had happened and how he could put it all right again. It was overwhelming, as it always was: he could solve other people's problems, but didn't know where to start on his own.

He listened to the crunch of his footsteps for a while, and slowly a hint of a plan appeared at the edge of his mental fog.

It was something, so he seized at it. He chased down the telephone number he needed—an unlisted mobile—and made the call there and then as he turned Hyde Park Corner.

"Hello?" came a voice, lagged by satellite and bemused by sleep. "Who is this?"

The sun had just come up in California, and it was already looking like it was going to be another beautiful day.

"Good morning, Professor. This is Doctor Samuil Petrovitch, and I'm calling to apologize for that comment about your mother. All your mothers, in fact…"

Book Three
Degrees of Freedom

1

It was cold. Petrovitch had climbed the monumental mound of rubble in the heat and the rain and the wind, and now the weather was turning again. His breath condensed in numinous clouds, breaking apart against his greatcoat and turning into sparkling drops of dew that clung and shivered on the thick green cloth.

He had a route: he knew which of the fallen metal beams would support his weight, and which of them would pitch him into a lake of broken glass; that concrete slab was unstable, but this seemingly inconsequential block rested on solid ground. He'd programmed it in, and it showed as a series of waymarkers, of handholds and foot-fasts, but only to him. It had been dangerous, winning that knowledge.

Dangerous to the extent that he was surprised to see another man making his way toward the summit from the other side. No one else had ever tried it before, though he'd never indicated that no one could. It wasn't like the remains of the Oshicora Tower were his in any moral or legal way.

That he had company had to mean something, but he'd have to wait to find out what.

He wasn't going to let this novelty get in the way of his ritual, performed as he had done every day at the same time for the previous three hundred and forty-eight days. He carried on climbing, barely having to think about his muscles, letting the weight and carry of his body fall into a series of familiar, learned movements.

He used the time to think about other things instead: on how his life had gone, how it was now and how, in the future that he was trying to shape, it might change. His face twitched, one corner of his mouth twisting slightly: the ghost of a smile, nothing more. He was haunted by a vision that held almost limitless promise, yet still stubbornly refused to come into being.

He was almost there, but not quite: figuratively and literally. The summit of the ruins of the Oshicora Tower was in sight, turned by his successive visits into a hollow crown of arching, twisted steel. He stepped up and over, and was already searching for something symbolic to throw.

He kicked at the surface detritus, at the pulverized dust and the shattered glass, the cracked ceiling tiles and strips of carpet, the broken particleboard and bare wires—all the things the tower contained before it was collapsed by cruise missiles.

There was the edge of a plastic chair. He reached down and lifted it up, pulling it free. It was pink, and had become separated from its wheeled base. It was cracked almost in half, but not quite. It would

do.

He took it to the precipice, and held it up over his head. It had become street theater for the crowds below, but that wasn't why he was doing it. When he'd started a year ago, it had been raining horizontally and he'd been soaked to the skin. There had been just Lucy and Tabletop and Valentina as witnesses. He hadn't even told them what he was doing: he'd have preferred to be entirely alone on that first day, but they hadn't let him. After that, it had taken on a life of its own, with thousands now surrounding the wide ring of rubble to watch him ceremonially, futilely, try to dig out the AI buried underneath.

They came, he climbed, he picked something up from the top and threw it to the ground. He descended, and they went. Pretty much it.

He flexed his arms. The pink seat flew through the crisp, still air, trailing dust. It bounced and tumbled, picking up speed as it fell. It pitched into the crowd, who ducked and dodged as it whirled by. It disappeared behind a mass of bodies, and he lost interest in it. Six weeks ago, he'd accidentally hit someone with the edge of a desk, but they'd come back the next day with a bandaged head and a shine in their eyes.

He wasn't sure what to make of that sort of… devotion.

Petrovitch was about to turn and head back down when he remembered one of them was coming up to meet him. Because it was the first time it had happened, he wasn't quite sure how to react. He wasn't beholden to anyone, anyone at all. He could just go, or he could stay.

He looked out over the crowd. Normally, they'd be dispersing by now: he'd thrown his thing, his image had been captured by innumerable cameras and streamed for a global audience. They should go. They all had jobs to do, because that was why they were in the Freezone.

But they were staying, watching the figure scrabble forward, slide back just as far. Petrovitch was uncertain whether the crowd were willing him on or trying to haul him down with their thoughts.

He sat down, his legs dangling free over the edge of the rubble. It was risky, certainly. Part of him realized it and relished it. It wasn't as if the remains were in any way stabilized. They would, and did, occasionally shift.

The man making his way up was taking a *yebani* long time. The clock in the corner of his vision counted out the seconds and minutes, and a quick consultation with his diary told him he needed to be somewhere on the other side of the Freezone in an hour.

"Are you going to get on with it, or should I come back tomorrow?" he called down.

The man's face turned upward, and Petrovitch's heart spun just a little faster.

"You could come and help me," said the man.

"Why should I make it easy for you? You never made it easy for me."

"You could have asked for someone else to officiate." He stopped and straightened up, giving Petrovitch a good view of the white clerical collar tucked around the neck of his black shirt.

"Madeleine wouldn't have anyone else. And whether she was punishing you or me, I still haven't worked out."

"Both, probably." The priest scrubbed at his face. He was sweating, despite the cold. "We need to talk."

"It's not like I've been hiding."

"We need to talk, now."

"I'm not shouting the rest of the conversation."

"Then help me."

Petrovitch considered matters. It'd be entirely reasonable to raise his middle finger and strand the priest on the side of an unstable rubble pile, leaving him the equally difficult climb down.

"I should tell you to *otvali.*"

"But you won't. You're tired, Petrovitch. The things you want most in the world are just as much out of your reach as they ever were."

Perhaps it was true. Perhaps he'd grown weary of continual confrontation. Perhaps he had, despite himself, changed.

"Meh." He jumped down and slithered the ten meters between them, closing the distance in bare seconds. He tucked his coat-tails underneath him and sat down where he'd stopped. "Here's good. Say what you have to say. Better still, say why you couldn't have said it anywhere else. Unless you crave a ready-made audience." Petrovitch frowned and sent virtual agents scurrying across the local network nodes. "You're not wired, are you?"

"Priests, above everyone else, should be able to keep secrets." Father John looked around him for a suitable perch, and Petrovitch rolled his eyes: servos whirred, and tiny pumps squeezed some more moisture out to coat the hard surfaces of the implants.

"It's not comfortable for me, and I don't care if it is for you. I have somewhere else to be soon enough, so you haven't got me for long."

The father crouched down on his haunches and tried to sit. He started to slip, and Petrovitch's arm slammed, not gently, across his chest. It forced him onto his backside.

"Plant your feet, you *mudak.* Be certain." When he was sure the priest wasn't going to start a landslide, he put his hand back in his lap.

“It’s all about confidence, misplaced or otherwise.”

“A metaphor for your life?” Father John rocked slightly from side to side, trying and failing to create a buttock-shaped depression underneath him.

“*Poydi’k chertu.* It’s worked well enough so far.”

“So far,” said Father John, “but not any longer. You’re stuck, aren’t you?”

“*Jebat moi lisiy cherep.*”

“And if you’d stop swearing at me and listen, I might be able to help.” He risked falling to gesture at the people below. “So might they.”

“I…” started Petrovitch. He looked at the crowd. He zoomed in and panned across their faces. He could have, if he’d wanted, named every one of them from the Freezone database. “They come here, day after day, and they don’t say anything. None of them ever say what they want.”

“You must have some idea.”

“I haven’t got a *yebani* clue.” Petrovitch shrugged. “I’ve never been too good at the human stuff.”

“That much is true. Did it never occur to you to speak to them? That that’s what they’re expecting?”

Petrovitch’s mouth twitched again, and he pushed his finger up the bridge of his nose to adjust his non-existent glasses.

“What?”

“For the love of God, man.” It was the priest’s turn to be exasperated. “You might be reviled by every politician from the Urals westward, but they,” and he pointed downward again, “they love you. You saved them. Twice. The ones who actually think about it know they owe their lives to you. Even those that don’t think you’re a living saint are indebted to you to a degree that any leader, religious or secular, would give their eye teeth for.”

“I don’t ask for it or need it.”

“Yes, you do. You come up here every day and do this, this thing that you do. You know it’s futile, pointless even. You could have spent your time lobbying the EU, the UN, but as far as I know, you haven’t talked to anyone about what’s trapped under here.”

“Not what. Who. He has a name.” Petrovitch felt the old anger rise up, but he knew how to deal with it. Breathe slowly, control the spin of his heart, play a brainwave pattern designed to mimic relaxation.

“Michael,” said the father. “That girl said…”

“She has a name too. Lucy.”

The priest looked troubled for a moment.

“We’re not talking about Lucy now. Or ever. So stick to the

subject because the clock's ticking."

"How long is it going to take you to dig out Michael from under here, using your bare hands?"

Petrovitch leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "When you say the magic words over your bread and wine, is it you who changes them to body and blood?" He knew he was on controversial territory, but he was doing more than enough to pay for the right, just by sitting and listening.

"No. It's by the power of the Holy Spirit—not that I expect you to believe that."

"So why say the words at all?"

"Because the words are important."

"And you have the answer to your question." Petrovitch stroked his nose. "This is a symbol."

"But it has no efficacy."

"What?"

"This. This throwing something down off this mountain. You'll be dead before you finish and the A… and Michael will still be trapped. The sacraments have the power to save. This is nothing but an empty gesture." Father John waved his hands in the air, to indicate just how great the nothingness was.

"One man's empty gesture is another's meaningful ritual." Petrovitch pursed his lips. "You don't want to go down that road. Not with me."

The priest pulled a face. "Look, I've been sent here. Sent here to ask you a question, and this is the only time you're ever alone."

"It's not like my answer is going to change in company." His interest was piqued, though. "Who sent you?"

"The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith."

Petrovitch raised his eyebrows. "The Inquisition? That's unexpected."

"Give it a rest. They haven't been called the Inquisition for over fifty years."

"So what do they want?"

"They want to know whether Michael can be considered to be alive. And if he is, does he have a soul?"

"Really? He's been trapped under this mound of rubble for almost a year and it's only now they decide to take any notice. Where have they been?" He snorted. "Up their own collective *zhopu*?"

"I don't expect you to understand," said the priest. "They've been doing nothing but debate this since the Long Night. What if an AI shows signs of independent, creative thought? What if it can empathize? What if it has the capacity for generosity, altruism, compassion?"

"I could have given them the answers eleven months ago."

"That's not the point. They needed to decide theoretically about all those what-ifs. If it could, what should we do about it, if anything? They have," and he hesitated, "a protocol they've drawn up. A sort of Turing test, except it doesn't measure intelligence. It measures *animus.*"

"So the Vatican wants to know if Michael is a spiritual being, or the equivalent of meat." Petrovitch blinked. "*Yobany stos.* They want to know if it can be saved."

"Something like that. The Holy Father ratified the protocol last night. The Congregation called me straightaway. They haven't been sitting on their hands; for the Church, this counts as indecent haste."

Petrovitch considered matters, then made his decision.

"No," he said.

"No? I haven't even told you what the Congregation wants."

"Doesn't matter." He got up and brushed the tails of his coat down. "The answer's the same. I'm not playing."

"If the Church declares Michael ensouled, then there's a moral duty laid on every Catholic to help free it." Father John tried to stand too, but Petrovitch had moved far enough away to be out of reach. The priest's feet started to slide again. "I thought that's what you wanted? You need us."

"Yeah. So you say." Petrovitch reached out and took hold of a broken iron beam. He knew it would take his weight, and he swung up on it. From there, he could regain the summit.

"Petrovitch! I thought you'd be pleased."

That stopped him. He looked back over his shoulder and shook his head slowly. "What the *huy* made you think that? Listen to me, because I'm only going to waste my breath saying this once. I don't care what a bunch of old men—and they are all men, aren't they?—I don't care what they say about Michael, whether they think he has a soul or not, whether he's worthy enough to be freed or whether he's going to be left here to rot for as long as his batteries last, slowly going mad in the dark. He is my friend, and I will not let him die. *Vrubatsa?*" He turned to leave, then realized he had one more thing to say.

"What?" said the priest.

"Stay away from Lucy. If I find you've so much as glanced in her direction, I'll gut you from neck to navel with a rusty spoon. You can tell Cardinal Ximenez that, too."

"That's not…" Father John gave up. "You can't stop them. Your cooperation is not necessary."

This time, Petrovitch did give the priest his middle finger. "You're about to find out just how wrong you are." He climbed up, and out of

sight.

The crowd shifted nervously. They were missing something, but couldn't tell what. Most of them started to drift away. Others, the hard-core watchers, decided that they'd wait for someone to tell them what had happened.

2

Petrovitch shook their hands: solid, Germanic greetings that went on for slightly longer than strictly necessary. The elder Krenz was a bullet-headed Bavarian with a clear liking for potato dumplings. The younger had sandy hair and an athletic build, but it was going to be a bruising fight with his genetic inheritance if he wanted to keep them.

"*Guten tag, Herren.*" Petrovitch looked at their suits, and decided that they were as uncomfortable with them as he was. "Welcome to the Freezone."

"Thank you," said the younger man. He looked around the empty dockside—empty but for the one container that had just been lifted off a ship and onto the quay. "This is ours?"

"Yeah. Sorry for having to drag you all the way over here, but my immigration status is a bit up in the air at the moment."

"Yes. So I understand." He hesitated. "What do I call you?"

"Petrovitch will do fine, Herr Krenz. No matter what you've heard to the contrary."

"Doctor Petrovitch, then." He looked at his father. "We can demonstrate the system for you, mostly wherever you like. We have included the formers for the five- and fifteen-meter structures, which is the largest we can go without prepared foundations."

"How about here?" Petrovitch shrugged. "It's as good a place as any."

There followed a moment of confusion, while the two Germans conversed in their native tongue.

"We thought that we were going to have a, a larger audience. Sonja Oshicora perhaps. Someone else from the Freezone Authority."

"Gentlemen. The Freezone Authority's mandate runs out in a couple of weeks' time. If this was a demonstration for them, they'd be here. It's not: it's a demonstration for me." He rubbed at his nose. "Is that going to be a problem?"

"I… *nein.* No, I mean."

"I know what you mean. I have a massive online dictionary and grammar checker open, and I can translate pretty much everything you say, whether it's in Hochdeutsch, Mandarin or Navaho." Petrovitch put his hand on the container's long-levered handle. "Shall we get on with it?"

Inside the container—very much the size of his old domik—were crates and bundles and, at the back, barrels of solvent and bulging black bales of granulated polymer. The two Germans started to unroll a large plastic sheet out on the gritty surface of the quay, while

Petrovitch poked around.

He'd seen the company's videos. He'd seen the pictures of the finished product. What he wanted, almost more than anything, was to see one for himself.

He dragged the generator out on its sledge, and plugged the industrial fan in. Krenz the elder watched him.

"You have the knowledge, yes?"

"I know pretty much what to do. I could have probably done all this myself, got all the makings for it, but I would have ended up making the mistakes that you've already fixed. I don't have time to make mistakes, Herr Krenz."

"You have fear?" He snorted like a bull. "You?"

"I know my reputation precedes me. But I'm not like that, really." He looked up at Krenz. "I just have a lot on my plate at the moment."

"It is not for me to give you the questions." Krenz checked the fuel gauge on the genny and thumbed the starter button. "I have one only."

The motor puttered into life, and he checked its performance by cocking his ear and listening to the quality of the sound it made.

"The question is this: how will you pay? No Freezone, no EU, no UN. No Oshicora." Krenz wiped at his bald head. "I meet Samuil Petrovitch. That is enough for today, but I am not a…" He struggled for the word.

"Charity." Petrovitch saw that the younger Krenz was attaching tubes to the top of the plastic sheet. Almost ready to inflate. "Don't worry, Herr Krenz. If you want money, I've got an extensive overdraft."

"A *wass?*"

"Credit. Two and a half billion euros' worth. Should be enough."

Krenz carried on working, fastening the plastic former to the fan by way of a flexible hose. Then he stopped. "Billion?"

"Yeah. I won't tell you the bank's name in case you mention it to them and a human manager takes exception. But their computer is fine with it." Petrovitch reached past Krenz and flicked the fan's switch. The blades cut the air with an audible chop, then it speeded up, sending a draft down the thick hose and causing the plastic sheet to ripple. The structure started to swell.

"They must find out. Tomorrow. Next week."

"The line of credit's only temporary, to be paid back in full tomorrow. In the meantime, if they kick up a fuss, I have a list of their other customers." Petrovitch smiled. "It includes some really very unpleasant people, and I'm guessing that unless they want half of Africa camped out on their doorstep demanding their stolen money back, they won't want it made public."

After twenty minutes, a shiny gray hemisphere quivered tautly on the dockside. In the meantime, the Krenzes had cooked up a batch of filler, and now started to pump it down the tubing.

"How long?" asked Petrovitch over the noise.

Young Krenz answered him. "Half an hour to fill. Five minutes to cure with the ultraviolet light."

"If I wanted one, I don't know, a hundred meters across? How would you do that?"

"We do not, we cannot…"

Petrovitch brushed his excuses aside. "The science is sound. It's just an engineering problem."

"Why would you want one that big? The domes are connectable. You just build more."

"I really want one bigger than that. Two hundred, maybe two fifty across. The solution for one hundred will be the same as for two hundred."

"But, Doctor. The air former would collapse under the weight of the uncured polymer."

"Yeah. But you don't cure as you go, do you? You fill completely, then set it solid with the UV. What if you fixed the bottom part of it even as you were pumping more on top? That's how Brunelleschi built his domes. Six hundred years ago."

"Yes, I understand that. I can only say we have never been asked to build one as big before now." Young Krenz frowned. "Why would you want to?"

"Because," said Petrovitch, "I saw it in a dream. Then when I had the time to look into it, I found your company. They're exactly the same. Just smaller."

"But a two-hundred-meter dome? You could put a village under it."

"Yeah. Something like that. Along with heat exchangers, a water reclamation system, hydroponics, air scrubbers. You do a passive photochromic coating for when it gets sunny, but there's no reason why you couldn't do a translucent photovoltaic one instead. It's pretty much free off-grid power. Use it to make hydrogen and store it for a fuel-cell power plant."

Older Krenz interrupted. "Herr Doktor. Why do you need us at all?"

"I could steal your tech. I could buy your company. Or I can behave like a decent human being for once and trade with you rather than ripping you off or taking over. Why don't we wait until we're ready before we talk terms?"

The pump finished filling the space between the two skins of the former, and the UV tubes already underneath flashed darkly into life.

Petrovitch rested his hand on the gray outside and felt the warmth of the uncured resin. He pulled his hand away, only to see the slight impression remain. It had gone hard already, and had preserved his palm-print for posterity.

He turned around. Older Krenz had an old-fashioned stopwatch which he turned face out toward him.

"You must wait. Three minutes."

He reluctantly backed away and, at the end of three minutes, the Krenzes set to work on the former, disconnecting the pipes and cutting through the thick plastic sheeting with short, curved knives. Petrovitch made a mental note that the formers he was going to use ought to be reusable.

They disconnected the fan and turned off the generator. After the constant noise, the silence was profound. There were sounds in the distance—the heavy, rhythmic thud of a pile-driver, the light chatter of a road-drill, and from across the river, traffic and sirens—but nothing to distract him from the imminent unveiling.

Young Krenz took one side, his father the other, and together they peeled the outer covering off the dome. The internal former had fallen away. All that was left was a trick of the light, an optical illusion.

The material was crystal clear: only the lensing effect made its presence visible. Petrovitch walked forward, the fingers of one hand stretched out in front of him, stepping slowly until his fingertips brushed against a smooth, oily surface. He left smears that seemed to hang in mid-air.

"*Yobany stos.*"

He paced around it, watching the way the images of the Krenzes warped and shifted through the plastic shell, until he arrived back at the start.

"Is it what you wanted?" asked Young Krenz.

Petrovitch hesitated before answering. In a moment, he was old again, looking down on a shoreline that was pocked with domes, while above him in the blue sky, flecks of light were rising out of sight. He was dying, and he didn't care.

"Yeah." He didn't need to imagine what it would look like scaled up. He'd already seen it. "Let's deal."

He offered them straight cash, in return for a licensing deal, access to their plans and their suppliers. He offered them enough that Young Krenz assumed that his father was going to take it, but Older Krenz had other ideas.

"I would make you a hundred-meter dome. I would that you show me the way to make it. I believe that, yes, we make playhouses and greenhouses and swimming pool covers, but we can make them bigger? You show me how. You show me these coatings. We are

family business: small and reliable, but not…"

"Imaginative," interrupted Young Krenz. He looked rueful, as if he'd had this conversation a hundred times before.

"Yes, yes, that. You tell us how to build bigger, and we will do it for you."

"I won't be asking for just one dome. I'll want several to start with, then more. I want to be able to do this myself. With help, sure, but something that a few people can put up in a day or so. Are you worried that I'm going to set up in competition against you?"

Krenz nodded.

"Herr Krenz, in two weeks' time, I'm going to need somewhere else to live. When the Metrozone Authority takes over, it'll be a matter of hours before I'm dragged in front of a judge on one extradition warrant or another. I'm not interested in Petrovitch Industries, I'm interested in my own survival. So, how about this? I will give you everything I can think of. Every last technical detail of every innovation I can come up with. In return, you do the same for me. Everything. No hiding anything to get a commercial advantage, because there won't be any. You'll be the only one selling Krenz domes. Think you can do that?"

"A… what is the word?"

"Partnership. I think."

The Krenzes looked at each other across the quayside, and at the smaller figure standing between them.

"Okay. Where do you want the first one built?"

Petrovitch started to laugh, and he laughed so hard that his lungs ached. "That, gentlemen, I can't tell you."

"But…"

"Because I don't exactly know."

"You do not know?"

"Not yet."

"How can we then go forward?"

Petrovitch dug his hands in his pockets. "Go home. Order formers for a hundred-meter dome. A dozen of them. Get all the stuff together that you'll need—I'll send instructions for the extra kit. Then you wait for my call. If it clicks past two weeks and I'm all over the news chained up in an orange jumpsuit, you'll have to assume the deal's off."

"We will be rich, or bankrupt." Young Krenz digested the news, and Older Krenz scratched at his head. "This is not a choice I wanted to have."

"That's fine. I'll give you two million up front." Petrovitch blinked. "Done. Don't spend it all at once."

He started to walk back toward where the new skyscrapers were

taking shape, where the cranes were tallest and the sounds of construction the loudest, when Young Krenz called after him.

"Do you want nothing in writing? A signed agreement? Something? Anything?"

Petrovitch twisted around and walked backward, unerringly navigating any of the obstacles in his path. Just because he couldn't see them didn't mean he wasn't looking. He considered telling the Krenzes that he'd recorded everything that had gone on: every word, every gesture, every detail of the equipment and the chemicals they'd used. He decided that would weird them out completely, and he needed them.

"I have your word. Do I need anything more?"

"I suppose not. This is most irregular, though."

"CNN called me an international criminal mastermind this morning. The *Jyllands-Posten* only has me down as the most dangerous man alive, which is slightly better, but not much. Yeah, of course I'll sign something if you want. Or we can keep this below the radar for as long as we can. Your call."

"We will do as you say, then. Two weeks? That does not give us much time."

"You and me both, Herr Krenz." Petrovitch took one last look at the dome, glittering in the low winter sun. The surface was cooling, and attracting moisture. If that was the case, he could have dew traps all around the base…

Then he turned again. He went back on the 'net, searching for anything of significance, while he let client software take over his walking.

It seemed like the whole world was intent on tearing itself apart, and he was setting himself up as the only one who could mend it again. Stupid, stupid, hubristic delusions. And yet he'd contacted a couple of obscure German engineers in their quiet Bavarian town, and they'd come of their own free will. No one had put a gun to their heads: a tactic Petrovitch was so used to, he'd grown sick of it.

His phone—the virtual one in his head—rang. He absently picked up the call before he'd checked the number, before he'd run it though a search program to tell him where the dialer was and who they were. He was distracted. A mistake, and he didn't often make that sort of error.

"Yeah?"

"Is that Samuil Petrovitch?"

The voice was American. The face attached to the voice tickled a memory buried deep inside his mind: it was clean-cut, well-fed, healthy. That was now, but back then he'd been bruised, ragged, terrified and desperate.

“Just to get this straight: your name didn’t used to be Petrovitch when you lived in St. Petersburg four, five years ago. You worked for a man called Boris. He kidnapped me…”

“*Chyort.* Dalton.”

3

I suppose this conversation was inevitable, but I'm pretty certain that when we went our separate ways, we had an unspoken agreement that we'd never talk to each other ever again." Even though Petrovitch was transmitting voice-only, there was no point in denying who he was.

"That," said Dalton, "had always been my intention, too. Forget St. Petersburg, forget Boris, forget you. Then suddenly a year ago, you became public enemy number one. It was kind of hard to ignore you. Walmart were selling caricature masks of you for Halloween."

"Yeah, well. What happens in St. Petersburg, stays in St. Petersburg." Petrovitch took a long look at Dalton, the office behind him, and the view from the window in what must have been an achingly tall tower of glass and steel. "You seem to have bounced back."

"What do I call you?"

"A lot of people ask me that. I tell them the same thing: Petrovitch."

"Doctor Petrovitch?"

"If they're being kind. You were always Dalton when I remembered you. Just call me Petrovitch and have done with it. Speaking of which, you shouldn't really be calling me anything. I'm the Antichrist, the devil incarnate and the villain in a thousand badly written and factually incorrect stories. You could be arrested for even talking to me."

Dalton stroked his fantastically smooth, tanned, moisturized chin. He leaned over and opened a slim cardboard file. The first sheet of paper had the picture of a man, a little younger than Petrovitch, with a shock of black hair falling over his left eye. "Know who that is?"

He did. "That's Anarchy. Wannabe-überhacker. Hit the NSA three months ago with a modified trojan, caused all sorts of problems, some of which they're still sorting out. Yeah, he's several steps ahead of the usual script-kiddies, but he got caught."

"He's a client of my firm. He assured me that this line is entirely private."

"There's no such thing as private anymore, Dalton. Not in this brave new world. Information wants to be free."

"Private enough, then. Enough to take the risk in contacting you."

"And why would you want to do that? You seem to have been doing fine without me." As Petrovitch talked, he was searching the public and not-so-public records for an indication as to just how fine.

“There you go: partner in the business, equity share, big corner office, married, a son and daughter, and another on the way—congratulations—house in the Hamptons. Kind of expensive, but you married money. Your wife’s father is a hardcore Reconstructionist, a senator, no less. You have done well. Too well to want to blow it all on saying hello to me.”

Dalton seemed to be having trouble breathing. “Whoa. Marie’s pregnant?”

“She went to a specialist yesterday. The day before, she bought three different off-the-shelf testing kits. It looks likely.” Petrovitch coughed. “Sorry if I ruined the surprise.”

“I’ll have to pretend I don’t know.” Dalton had his fist closed over his chest. “Are you just yanking my chain?”

“Not this time, *tovarisch.* She’s probably just waiting for the right time to tell you. Sure you don’t want to hang up on me?”

“I made my decision a while back. I… I’m a coward, Petrovitch. You know that better than most. I went to pieces, and it was only because you kept your head that I’m here today. Everything I have now, I owe it to you. I want—five years too late—to thank you.”

“Dalton, I raped your bank accounts. I took pretty much everything you had at the time. I beggared you. Or have you forgotten? Maybe you’ve forgotten too about all the other people that Boris kidnapped and I didn’t help? Or the ones where something went wrong—when the ransom wasn’t paid or there was a trace on the account—what about them? The ones he killed. The ones where he put his hands around their neck and crushed their larynx so that they’d suffocate, nice and slow. Every time that happened, I just turned the page on whichever textbook I was reading, and was glad it wasn’t me.”

“Petrovitch, I’ve been in denial ever since I got back from St. Petersburg. Some mornings I woke up and I even wondered if it had even happened to me at all. Then your face was all over the news and I found I couldn’t suppress the memories any longer. But who can I talk to? This man, this Russian kid who saved me, is the same one who’s an enemy of the state. Maybe if I’d have come clean a year ago, things would have been fine. I couldn’t, because I was a coward then, and I’m a coward now.”

“You’re not a coward, Dalton. You didn’t ask to be kidnapped. None of Boris’ victims did. And I wasn’t some *yebani* angel, sent from above to help you. You were the opportunity I needed to bail out, and it could just as easily have been someone else.”

“You don’t understand, Petrovitch…”

“Then explain it better, man!”

“I’m trying to. In court, I’m this silver-tongued magician.

Opposing counsel are actually afraid of me. Me? Can you believe that?"

"Okay. You feel like you owe me something. I want nothing from you. I took what I needed at the time. I can even pay it back, though that's as likely to get you into trouble as anything else."

"The money means nothing to me."

"You weren't impressed at the time."

"You made me reassess all my priorities. Everything I have dates from the moment I stepped back onto U.S. soil. My family, my career. I earned more money in the twelve months after I came back than you took from me."

"It was enough. Enough to get me away, enough to hide me. I was, if not happy, fulfilled. And I hadn't had to kill anyone to be that way. It was a good deal, Dalton. Both of us got something we wanted out of it. It was fair. Okay, your thanks is welcome, but why drag this up now, unless you've suddenly developed a death wish? What are you going to tell your wife when she asks you how work was?" Petrovitch's eyelid twitched. "She doesn't know any of this, does she? When you said, who could you tell, what you meant was, you haven't told her anything."

Dalton made a little gesture of defeat with his shoulders.

"I've been married for just over a year," said Petrovitch, "and even I know that not telling your wife stuff is bad." He went off on his own reverie for a moment, before snapping his concentration back to the American. "Doesn't mean I follow my own advice, though."

"Every time you come on the news—and that's a lot—she starts up on this tirade of abuse. About how you're like Hitler and Stalin, Pol Pot and Mao all rolled into one. That you're coming for us while we sleep, because freaks like you don't need sleep; about how you're plotting to take away our country and our values and our children. She's smart, and loving, and kind. She runs charity fundraisers for good causes. She's leader of the women's circle at church. She's a good person, Petrovitch, a godly person, the mother of my children."

"All three of them."

"That. And every time she starts, I want to shake her and shake her until she stops because you're the reason I'm there at all."

Petrovitch tilted his head to one side. "You could just stop watching the news with her."

"I have to tell her. I have to tell her tonight."

"That's up to you, Dalton. I wouldn't. I'd bury it so deep it'd take a geological age to bring it to the surface again. You have a good life: don't throw it away. Look—what she believes might be true. I tricked Boris into letting you go, and in doing so, I betrayed the trust of a man who'd shown me nothing but kindness. The money he gave me kept

me and my mother and my sister fed. It allowed me to study. When I fucked Boris over, I did it for cold, hard cash, and I still haven't dared to find out what happened to the rest of my family. You can keep on fooling yourself about my motives for saving you, but I know what went through my mind that night."

Dalton leaned back in his chair and looked around his office, at all the accoutrements of his position and his power. "I'm a lawyer, right? I do corporate law. The guys I work with, both clients and partners, play hardball with each other to get even the slightest advantage. They don't give anything away, either. Sure, we're all brothers in the Reconstruction: we all stay sober and clean, we don't swear or hire hookers, we all smile and gladhand each other and ask about each other's wives. Maybe some of them actually believe it." He put his tongue in his cheek and rolled it around, the bulge visible from the outside. "The thing is, what they're doing to each other is all the more savage and brutal because they have the outward appearance of being decent, dependable men—while the truth is, every last one of those robbers would have left me to rot in that St. Petersburg basement."

Petrovitch tried to voice his objections, but didn't get any further than a stuttered "I…"

"You had all my money, hundreds of thousands of dollars of it. You could have cut and run. Instead, you came back for me. You scammed Boris and if he'd known any of it, if he'd suspected a single thing, he would have killed the pair of us in an eyeblink. You risked your life to save mine." Dalton jabbed his finger at the camera. "I know your secret, Petrovitch. I know that you are a good person and you will always be that way."

"Yeah, well." Petrovitch blew out a stream of air. "Don't spread it around. I've a reputation to keep."

"I want to help you. I want to do for you what you did for me."

"I'm not lying on a filthy mattress in a kidnapper's freezing-cold basement getting trashed on cheap vodka just to stay warm."

"Your colleague Doctor Ekanobi is. Apart from the vodka part."

"We had one of your CIA agents in custody, and I'd hoped for an exchange, but Sonja said she was forced to just hand her back. We got nothing in return." Petrovitch pursed his lips. "No one has seen Pif for ten months. Homeland Security have her… somewhere. Even I can't find out where. You know, all your really confidential stuff is done on hand-written notes now. You use typewriters. You courier it in briefcases wired to incinerate their contents if they're tampered with. I have nothing, Dalton. I can't even suggest where to start looking for her."

"Why don't you let me deal with that?"

"If the Nobel committee can't find her, what makes you think you can?"

"Because I'm flying to California tomorrow with a writ of habeas corpus in my pocket. I'm going to serve it in the State Supreme Court, and I expect them to rule on it in a couple of days. Wherever she is, whoever has her, will have to bring her to court and argue their case in front of a judge."

"Far be it from me to point out some flaws in your plan, but are you a complete *mudak?* Apart from the fact all they're going to do is laugh in your face when you wave your little piece of paper at them, you're going to end up dead on the court steps. If someone doesn't shoot you first, a rent-a-mob will beat your brains out with their fists."

"They won't laugh at me, Petrovitch. The justices take their responsibilities very seriously indeed. They have to act. They have no choice. Habeas corpus applies equally in all courts. It applies to every branch of the judiciary and the executive. It applies to everyone, citizen or not. They have to produce her person and give their reason, in law, why they can continue to hold her. There are no exceptions to this rule, and believe me, I've done my homework."

"So why the *chyort* has no one done this before?"

"Because you have no friends over here. No one's going to stand up for you, or her. I know you tried to ginger up some interest, but you're fighting against Reconstruction. We all know what waits for us if we step out of line."

"What I don't get is why you're willing to risk that. Dalton, we were done. We had a deal and we carried it to a mutually beneficial conclusion. It's over. You don't owe me anything, anymore than I owe you."

"I've read everything about you. I know what you've done, what you had to go through to do it. I know about the Sorensons and the CIA. I know about this… thing you call Michael and where it came from. I know about the Long Night. I know what you are. I know you. You don't get me because you're not me. You don't know anything about me, about the thousand little compromises I make every waking hour just to fit in with this vast, cold monolith called Reconstruction. If you knew me, you'd curse me and call me a coward, because that's what I've been like every day for five years." Dalton looked above the camera. There must have been a clock on the wall behind it. "I was only supposed to be on for five minutes. Six max. No matter how careful I'm being, they can still trace this call."

"I can deal with that," said Petrovitch. "You know they're going to crucify you. You're going to lose everything. Your wife is going to leave you and take your kids with her. Her daddy's going to ruin you. And you'll be so fired, I'll be able to see the detonation from orbit."

“I know.”

“And you’re still going to go through with this?”

“Yes. Flight’s booked. My case is packed. I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“I don’t know what to say. I’m supposed to be the king of the futile gesture, and here I am, trumped by some stupid Yankee lawyer. I can only say this one more time: Dalton, don’t do it.”

“The time when you could tell me what to do is long past, Petrovitch. I don’t think I’ll have to call you again to let you know how I’m doing. I think that’s going to be pretty obvious.”

“Just… when all this is over, and you need somewhere to hide: I can do that for you, too.”

“Thank you.” There was a tone, and a woman’s voice announced that his next appointment was outside. “I won’t keep him a minute, Adele.” Dalton muted the intercom. “Not that it’s going to matter. All my clients will drop me like a scalding-hot stone when they find out.”

“You’d better go.” Petrovitch blinked. He’d walked all the way to Limehouse. A truck was rattling slowly up behind him, its back full of blue-overalled *nikkeijin:* an Oshicora work crew. He raised his hand to the driver, who brought the vehicle slowly to a halt.

“Goodbye, Petrovitch.”

“Goodbye, Dalton. And good luck.” Petrovitch caught the outstretched arm of one of the workers and clambered up over the tailgate. The men and women shuffled aside to make room for him, and he sat down, back against the low metal side.

“Petrovitch-san,” said the foreman, “you are crying.” He proffered his own packet of paper tissues, of which there was one left.

“It’s dust. And these *yebani* eyes.” Petrovitch tapped the white of his left eye with his ragged fingernail so that it made a distinct hollow tock. “It always happens when it’s cold.”

4

The truck took him all the way to Green Park, through the area worst affected by the Outie advance: the East and West Ends, Commercial Road and Whitechapel, Aldgate and Holborn, and Aldwych.

A few of the damaged buildings were being saved. Most had been torn down, the remains of them carted away to be picked through and recycled by Metrozoners south of the river and desperate for work. There were lucrative contracts for that, like there were contracts for everything these days.

In place of the lost historic facades, towers of steel and glass rose up to touch the sky—and the Freezone was making sure that each and every one of them could generate their own power, cool themselves down in summer and heat themselves up in winter, and be as safe and clean and bright as they could be.

The architects loved Petrovitch, too.

As soon as the truck stopped, he vaulted off the back and onto the road. He made his *sayonaras*, and started down Piccadilly. He glanced up at the ruins of the Oshicora Tower, its pinnacle catching the low winter sun as it sneaked through a gap in the high cloud.

Father John had evidently made it down again. Petrovitch didn't care much if he'd done so in one piece. It was tempting to make the ascent again, just for himself, like it had been in the beginning. He toyed with the idea before dismissing it: if he broke the established ritual, someone might ask why. Which would be bad. He needed to keep everyone's attention focused on the things he did in the open, so that they wouldn't start looking for his sleights-of-hand.

Misdirection. It was harder work than mere secrecy.

He rounded Hyde Park Corner. He had a suite of rooms in the nearby Hilton, what was left of it. No one would be there, though: Valentina and Tabletop would be stalking the streets, searching for the unaccounted-for CIA agent Slipper, while Lucy was busy—at least, should be busy—in Petrovitch's lab. New lab. There wasn't much left of the old one, or anything else around it. *V'nebrachny* Americans.

They were building on Hyde Park, just like they seemed to be building everywhere, though the work was slower because of the bodies they kept on exhuming and carrying away to a temporary mortuary on the edge of the site. But they worked none the less. Cranes, trucks, workers. Pile-drivers, welders, scaffolders. So much noise where there had been only silence.

He dug his hands into his pockets and kept walking, right past the

end of Exhibition Road, still cordoned off with temporary wire barriers while the college and the State Department argued about who was responsible for the damage. Petrovitch lingered again: all that remained of the whiteboard Pif had used to extract the first of her equations was a grainy photograph taken on her camera. His original floating sphere was somewhere underneath it.

Everything was temporary. Nothing lasted forever, not things, not people, not love, not time itself.

He shrugged and walked on. Of course there was no question over who was responsible, just one over who was going to pay for it. In the meantime, he carried on past the Albert Hall to the building just next door—an arts college—which he'd co-opted until they could find some artists.

Glass-fronted edifices had fared badly, and this one had been no exception. The front was swathed in heavy plastic that rippled in the wind and did nothing to insulate the inside from the biting cold. But there was electricity, and light, and network access. He'd decided that it was good enough, and set up shop in the basement.

He peeled his way through the doorframe and let the translucent sheet fall back behind him. The sounds of outside became muffled and changed. It was more like a ship at sea now, crackling and groaning with every gust and gyre.

"Hey," he said.

Out of sight, Lucy answered into her mouthpiece. "I was waiting for you."

Petrovitch headed for the stairwell. "Are you done?"

He could hear her breathing: she would insist on balancing the microphone just too high so that it was between her nose and her upper lip. "I don't know. I mean, I followed the instructions, and it looks like it could work. There were some bits left over."

"There always are." He trotted down the stairs and through the fire doors.

"It's not going to blow up, is it?"

"No."

"Sure?"

"Yeah. Well, the flywheel might. As long as you don't stand directly in the way, it'll be fine." He barged through another door. The room had originally been for the curation and restoration of old paintings, big enough for what he wanted, but the machine in front of him was now too tall, too wide, to ever make it outside. He looked back at the exit. "Can't think of everything."

Lucy peeled her headset off and threw it casually on the side of a sink. "For what it's worth," and she made a little show of revealing her creation, as if she were a magician's assistant.

Which, in a way, she was.

She looked so painfully young, so painfully alone. Petrovitch was a poor substitute for a parent: he had no idea how to make it better. Keeping her occupied like this was the best he could do, but it didn't stop her from waking in the night, calling out for her lost mother and father, and sobbing when she realized that they were never coming back.

"Are you going to start it up, then?"

She went back to her printed notes. "Okay. Turn it on at the wall—done that. Take the manual brakes off the flywheel and the oscillator." As she spun the two wheels that released the clamps, she asked, "Did you get a call today? From a Catholic priest?"

"Yeah. No; he came to talk to me in person. Haven't seen any old guys in red robes wandering around yet, but it's only a matter of time."

"What's it all about? He asked me about Michael, whether I'd be willing to talk to some committee or other. I'd said he'd need to check with you first."

"He had checked with me first. I told him I'd rip his arms off and beat him with the wet ends if he bothered you."

"I guess it'll suck to be him, then." She looked down at the sheet of paper in her hand, and flicked two switches.

"Tell me if he tries to contact you again. Or anyone else on the same subject." He wondered how far to take it. "I'm not going to forbid you from talking about Michael—not really my style—but, you know. I'd prefer it if you didn't. Not to them."

"I won't." She tugged at her ponytail and flashed him a smile. "Don't worry."

"The judge said it's my job to worry about you."

Her smile slipped, and she turned her back on him.

"Sorry," he said.

"Stop apologizing. Just, just press a button, or something."

Petrovitch sighed and reached past her to thumb the big red button on the front of the control panel. The machine's central column sank down smoothly, then with only the top part of it showing, it rose again to its full height. It paused for a moment, then started to sink again, repeating the cycle.

Lucy looked up. "That bit works."

"Engage the magnetic coupling."

"You love this, don't you?"

"You'll learn to love it too." Petrovitch watched as she closed the circuit-breaker on the electromagnets. There were actual honest-to-god sparks, fat blue ones that leaped out at the copper contacts.

She gave a little squeak, but there was no harm done.

A needle started to pulse across a meter, creeping ever closer to the end-stop. The machine began to sing with a low bass note.

Petrovitch eased Lucy aside and inspected all the dials and readings. At some point he was going to have to modify the test rig so that it gave a digital read-out that he could then arrange in neat graphs and publish in a reputable peer-reviewed journal.

For now, he contented himself with making a recording of everything he saw, storing it away on the hard-drive he kept in his pocket.

The flywheel was starting to push the limits which he'd set and, with no load, there was nothing to stop it eventually spinning itself to destruction. The pitch it was calling at was beyond a middle-C: time to let it slow down. He heaved the switching gear back and thumbed the red switch.

The central column stopped its steady rise and fall, and the flywheel's note slowly ran down through the octave.

"So what did we just do?"

Petrovitch lined up the footage he'd shot, editing it down and splicing it to a convenient thirty-second clip that a news channels could stream without effort. "Solved the world's energy needs for the foreseeable future."

"How?"

"By using a second-quantum repulsor to lift a weight, which then falls and does work. But the energy we use to power the repulsors to raise the load is less than we generate when it goes down. It's a perpetual motion machine." The video clip and the accompanying notes were ready to go. "If you've got shares in energy companies, tell me now."

"Hang on." Lucy walked around the base of the machine. "We put electricity in. We get electricity out. More comes out than we put in, so we can use that electricity to run the machine and still have some left over. Right?"

"And it'll never stop. Once you've built one, you have free power —until it breaks down, of course. Even I can't prevent that."

"How much free power?"

"Out of this thing? Barely enough for a two-bar electric fire. But they'll get bigger, better. No one will ever build a power station again that doesn't use these."

"You're serious."

"Yeah. I mean, it's not really free energy: it has to come from somewhere, because otherwise that's just wrong. But we don't have to do anything to get it. We just press a button and there it is." There was nothing stopping him. "Sure about those shares?"

"They're going to get hosed, aren't they?"

“Yeah. That’s progress for you.” And he sent the footage out into the ether. “It’s way past lunch. You eaten yet?”

“No.” She went back through the checklist, turning everything off, before finally unplugging the device from the wall. “I didn’t feel hungry.”

“Neither did I, but I suppose we ought. I’ll buy.”

“You’re going to have to. Your idea of a regular allowance is once every six months.” She looked at him. “Anyway, since when have you had to pay for anything?”

“Yeah. Okay, so let’s go out and see what we can scrounge.”

They left the arts college, pushing back out through the plastic and onto the street. Petrovitch interrogated the local area for somewhere serving food: the nearest was their “usual,” the works canteen in the middle of the Hyde Park building site.

The man watching the main gate threw a couple of hard hats at them, waving them through before Petrovitch was able to explain his mission. But it was like that most places he went in the Freezone: he had the grace to feel faintly embarrassed, while Lucy took it as her right.

“It’s cold,” she said, balancing across a line of duck-boards. “Never used to be this cold.”

“The Metrozone made its own weather. It will do again. Next winter here won’t be like this one.”

“And where will we be next winter?”

“Difficult to say,” said Petrovitch. “We have options. Would you want to stay here, after the Freezone packs up?”

“I don’t know. There’s not much left for me here. There’s the house, I suppose.” The house; not her house or her parents’ house, not even home. “Maybe I should sell it to someone else. It’s in good condition.”

“You could keep it, too.”

“I think,” she said, “that I wouldn’t be comfortable living there whatever I decide to do.” Lucy glanced back at Petrovitch. “I’d keep thinking about what I saw out of my bedroom window.”

“Ah. Fox.”

“Yes. Him.” She carried on, seemingly more at ease with the howl of metal grinders and the actinic white glare of welding torches than quiet suburbia.

Ahead were prefab huts, jacked up on pylons to be clear of the mud—purpose built, not converted domiks. Windows ran with condensation and pearled the artificial light inside. The exhaust from an extractor blew cooking smells at them with the force of a gale.

“So, salad not on the menu again.”

“Yeah, well. It’s not like I have a heart to worry about anymore.”

Petrovitch held the door open for her, and she stepped inside, flipping her hard hat into her hand.

They were greeted like heroes, and Lucy was right: he never had to pay for anything, and neither did she. The construction workers were honored to merely sit and eat with the two. They crowded around, joining tables, moving chairs, taking far longer over their second mug of coffee than their agreed break allowed.

They asked him questions—on any subject, because he always had an opinion—and he answered them between mouthfuls of bread, bacon, sausage and beans, waving his fork around when he needed emphasis.

In the corner of the room, unwatched, a flat-screen monitor showed a tall column of milled steel rising and falling in the center of a crude octagonal base. A voice-over expressed wonder, fear, uncertainty—but no one in the room was listening to the news reader as she stumbled over her explanation of an over-unity engine. At some point, a talking head, someone only Petrovitch would have recognized, appeared to discuss the finer points of the laws of thermodynamics.

And even he was lost when the crowd around the table parted to let Madeleine through.

5

She stood there at one end of the long canteen table, Petrovitch sat at the other with Lucy. Silence flowed from her like a cold, heavy stream until the whole room was flooded with it.

Petrovitch pushed his plate away and leaned back in his chair. Lucy looked first at Madeleine, then at Petrovitch, trying to judge the mood. She sensed that something had changed, and she put down her fork to gently lay her hand on her ersatz-father's forearm.

Petrovitch glanced at her from the corner of his eye, and she shook her head slightly. So, no argument today. Perhaps.

It had started with one thing, and had snowballed from there: he hadn't told her about Michael. He'd kept it a secret for all kinds of reasons, and all of them, he thought, good. He hadn't cheated on her. He hadn't neglected her. He'd even fought his way through a city in flames to save her. If there was any way left for him to demonstrate his love for her, he was open to suggestions. She was Mother to everyone, but wife to none.

She didn't live with him. She didn't live anywhere, except on her bike. She traveled around the Freezone, appearing un-announced at work camps and building sites, intent on keeping everyone honest.

Petrovitch saw her every other day or so. It might have been her way of checking up on him, keeping him honest too. She never announced her visits to him, either. But in eleven months, she'd never found him compromised, while showing no sign of coming back to him.

And now she wasn't saying anything, the silence stretching to breaking point. Someone was going to giggle, or fart, and from the expression on her face, she wasn't in the mood for levity.

"You can just call me. I'll come. And you know that."

"Yes. I know," she said. "Can we step outside for a moment?"

"Just me?"

"Just you, Sam." Her motorbike leathers creaked as she adjusted her stance. "Is that all right?"

He couldn't read her. He turned slightly to Lucy. "You going to be okay on your own for a bit?"

"I'm hardly on my own. I'll be fine. Go, go."

He pushed back his chair with a scrape. "Thank you for your company, ladies and gentlemen."

They watched him follow Madeleine out of the canteen, and only as the door started to swing shut did the murmur of conversation start up again.

She didn't stop, though. Her bike was on the far side of the site, up by Lancaster Gate. She strode, and Petrovitch had to jog to keep up with her long-legged strides.

"Where's the fire?"

"Who said anything about a fire?" she said. She was breathless, and something was wrong.

"Yeah. You going to tell me now, or do I have to work it out?"

"Neither. I'll show you."

"So there is a fire."

"Will you…" She almost broke step, as did her voice. "Just hurry."

They arrived at the gate. Petrovitch was going to wait for the guard to open the barrier: Madeleine vaulted it and went over to her bike, hastily abandoned in the middle of the road. She beckoned urgently to him.

"Sorry," he said to the bemused security man and ducked under the rising metal pole. Madeleine threw a helmet at him, which he caught unerringly even in the glare and shadows of the site's floodlights. The speed at which it came knocked him onto his back foot.

She hadn't noticed. As soon as the helmet left her hand, she was astride the bike, kicking up the stand, starting the engine with a press of her thumb.

"Aren't you putting one on too?"

"That is mine. Get on." She throttled the engine and made the turbine whine. "And hold tight."

He dropped the helmet on his head, where it slopped around loosely, and tried to work out how—and where—to sit.

"Just, just get on, Sam. Please."

He hopped his leg over and eased himself down behind her. There was a grab rail behind him, but if she was going to ride as recklessly as he thought she would, that wasn't going to be much use. Tentatively, he put his arms around Madeleine's waist and caught his fingers together.

She momentarily stiffened, then shivered. Then she hauled on the accelerator like the very gates of Hell were opening somewhere and she had to go and stand in the breach.

Petrovitch almost lost his grip. He clung on for his life, and held her closer than he'd done in almost a year.

The lights of the Freezone whipped by in a sodium-orange blur, but he knew where he was. He hat-navved them taking a sharp left—so sharp his knee almost scraped the tarmac—up the Edgware Road, and another right at Marylebone. Her old church had been on the corner there, reduced to burned timbers and scorched brick and then

cleared to be yet another building site.

He'd first met her there; he'd been dying, she'd brought him back to life. He wondered if her choice of route was deliberate, as if to point out that it wasn't just him who'd been doing the saving. Or it could just have been faster this way. He knew where they were going now.

Petrovitch had had a domik at Regent's Park, a bolt-hole for when disaster struck. He'd lost it in the Long Night, along with his case of memories, courtesy of the New Machine Jihad. He'd not gone back, not looked for it amongst the tumbled chaos of containers.

The Freezone had been clearing it, crews with gas axes working day and night. They'd got almost to the lowest level. And now, as they turned another corner with the back wheel almost sliding out, there was no activity at all. No blue-white cutting flames, no noise of grinding metal or the grumble of heavy cranes.

She drove toward where the Inner Circle had been, and braked sharply. Petrovitch turned his head sideways to Madeleine's back and pressed his cheek against her, frustrated only by the plastic and kevlar of the helmet.

The engine died, and it was silent. Despite the ferocity of the ride, they both sat there, perfectly still, him against her, she leaning slightly back to increase the contact.

"I know why we're here," he mumbled through the foam interior of the helmet.

"You do?" Her words were equally indistinct, numbed by the cold.

"Container Zero."

"How do you do it? How do you make these wild guesses and come up with the right answer?" She flexed her shoulders, and he felt her muscles move, dense and fluid.

"Because there's no other reason for us to be here. No other reason for me to be here. Everything else you can handle, but not the Last Armageddonist."

"I never believed it was true. But it is." She shrugged again, this time with purpose. "Come on. I'll show you."

Petrovitch found the ground and hopped off. She rolled the bike onto its stand and stepped over the seat. She knew the way—despite the anonymous jumble of containers, she turned unerringly right, left, right, following the line of compacted earth to her destination.

Petrovitch knew the way, too. Moreover, he could see. He blinked, and his vision changed to a slightly stuttering but bright zoetrope of images. He blinked again, and the scene was transformed into a wash of reds and blues, depending on their heat.

Madeleine's head and hands were white, incandescent almost.

That was the effect of fear, and he'd not known her to be so scared, ever. Which was saying something.

The path finished. A container blocked their way. Container Zero. The first domik to be planted on Regent's Park. The door had been partially cut with a letterbox-sized window, burned through the metal at head height.

"Standard procedure. Cut a hole, check the contents, mark for disposal, opening or decontamination. When the wrecking crew cut this one…"

"How many people know?"

"Four—five now. I've told them not to talk."

"Yeah, like that's going to work. You've laid off the whole site. If it's not round the Freezone by dinner time that something's going on, I'll be a *shluha vokzal'naja.* You've got a couple of hours before this goes global. If that." He stretched himself up and looked through the slot. "Has anyone been in?"

"No."

"Thank *huy* for that." He looked up and around him. "Does the door mechanism work?"

"They're welded shut. From the inside. We're going to have to make that hole bigger." The work crew's cutting equipment was abandoned nearby. "Know how to use that?"

He didn't. Then he did. "In theory."

Petrovitch hefted the trolley holding the gas cylinders and wheeled it closer, then opened the valve on the acetylene. It burned with a smoky orange flame, flickering and bright in the dusk. Then he turned on the oxygen and the flame turned into a blue spearpoint.

He dialed back the gain on his eyes until he could just about see what he was doing, and no more. The tip of the fire touched the outside of the container, which started to dribble orange drops of molten steel.

"This could take a while." He could feel the heat on his face, a dry, furnace heat. "Tell me what he's doing in there."

Madeleine tried to look past the burning metal. "Just… just sitting. Facing the door. There's something on his left-hand side. I think it's a bomb."

"How big? Size, not megatonnage."

"It's about," she started, and he interrupted.

"I can't see how far your hands are apart because I'm holding a two-thousand-degree torch and I don't want to go blind or accidentally set myself on fire. Again."

"About a meter long. A tube in a cradle, maybe half a meter across."

"Panel? Wires?"

“There were wires.”

“Any idea where the wires were coming from?”

“Couldn’t see. From him. From under the chair he’s in, perhaps.”

Petrovitch clenched his fists around the gas axe. “This doesn’t fill me with confidence.”

“You think it’s rigged?”

“I know it is. It just depends on how.” He turned the corner with the flame. “Still, if opening the container was going to trip it, it would have tripped already. Dodged that bullet, at least.”

“Sam…”

“Yeah?” It would be good if he could concentrate, but she was standing very close to him. He could feel her breath on the back of his head.

“I wish you’d told me about Michael.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “Do you really want to do this now? Considering the only imminent intimate mingling I might enjoy with you will be our atoms forming part of the same rapidly expanding fireball?”

She clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth.

“Yeah. Sue me,” he muttered. “You know I want you back. But I need you to shut up for one minute.”

She walked away from him, and he slowly drew the gas torch back up toward the previously cut hole. When it was nearly complete, he stopped and turned the oxygen back off.

Madeleine reached forward to bend the metal aside. Petrovitch caught her wrist.

“Hot. Still hot. Will remain hot for a while yet.” He spun the valve on the acetylene, and the orange flame flickered and died. “If you weren’t in such a hurry to get rid of me, you’d have worked that out.”

“I’m not trying…” She looked at her wrist, and Petrovitch let go.

“You can’t keep away. You find excuses to pass by, but you always find excuses to go again before anything meaningful can happen.”

“You lied to me.” Madeleine leaned back against Container Zero, sliding down its pitted side until she was crouched on her haunches.

“I lied to the whole world. It seemed to me like it was the only option.” He copied her position, on the other side of the unopened cut. “It was the only option at the time.”

“No. You didn’t trust me. You wanted a pet AI to keep for yourself. All the business with the CIA: we could have skipped all that if you’d come clean.”

“That, I doubt. We would have ended up with gods-knows-what raining down on us from the sky, and still have had the Outies to deal

with just on our own. I would have died at Waterloo Bridge, and you'd have been overrun on your overpass." Petrovitch checked the clock in the corner of his vision. The metal should be cold enough to touch, but fighting with Madeleine was better than missing her. "We'd be dead, the Outies would have half the city, and Michael would have been hunted to extinction."

"So what we have now makes everything you did okay?"

"If it's a choice between a smoking ruin containing a million or so charred corpses ruled over by someone like Fox, and a Freezone ready to take fifteen million citizens grateful for the facts of running water and electricity? Yeah. Let me think about that for a nanosecond."

"I'm glad you think it was worth losing me."

His heart was incapable of skipping a beat. It never beat at all, just spun and spun and never stopped. Maybe it slowed briefly, just enough to cause him a transient but real pain.

"I would have lost you whichever choice I made. At least this way, I get to see you live." Petrovitch levered himself up and put his shoulder to the metalwork.

It bent with a creak, leaving a gap only just large enough for him to squeeze through. Certainly not her.

"You made it that size deliberately, didn't you?" she said.

"Can't prove it." He shrugged off his greatcoat and let it fall to the ground. "*Yobany stos,* it's colder than Siberia."

He started to ease himself into the hole, one foot inside first, then feeling the sharp edges pressing into his chest and back. Slowly, he worked his way in, until he was able to wriggle free and bring his other leg after him.

The interior of Container Zero boomed with his footsteps.

"Be careful," she said, and threaded his coat through to him.

He took it and pulled it around him, then turned to face the Last Armageddonist.

6

Petrovitch stepped slowly over, forcing his eyes to adjust to the low light levels, and flicking between the near infrared and visible parts of the spectrum. He moved slowly so he could composite the images together and make certain that he wasn't blundering into a laser net or onto a pressure pad.

The air was cold, dry, like a tomb. There was no hint of decay, just a vague smell of age. He had to be the first living person in there for a very long time: he ran a quick search for the history of Regent's Park, and found that the first domiks had been deposited on the green grass late in twenty-oh-two. Armageddon had been declared officially over with the death of van Hooren in twenty-oh-nine. Eighteen years then, minimum.

And this one had been here all that time, right in the heart of the Metrozone. Petrovitch stood in front of the Armageddonist's heavy wooden chair and stared into his desiccated face.

"All this. All this was your fault, you *govnosos.* Everything."

The Armageddonist's skin was drawn tight over his teeth and he seemed to be grinning. Petrovitch had the urge to drive his fist through his dead staring eye-sockets, then tear off his arms all the better to beat him with the ragged ends.

Armageddon had changed the world. That was their intention, of course, but despite them bombing their way across Europe, west to east, God had not returned to judge either the quick or the dead.

The survivors had been left with a continent covered with hot-spots, millions of refugees washing across newly fortified borders, collapsed economies and radioactive rain.

It had left Petrovitch with a weak heart that had blighted a childhood which had ended abruptly when his father had canced out. He had as much reason as the next man to hate the Armageddonists.

Like every other person affected, he'd dreamed about what he'd say to one if he had the chance. Now, now he could: if he wanted, he could vent two decades of incoherent rage and frustration on the very object of his anger. No matter that it would fall on deaf ears.

He look a step back. He'd thought the Armageddonist's hands were locked rigid on the arms of the chair, but that was only true for the right. The left was curled around a lever, like the heavy switching gear on his perpetual motion machine. He hunkered down for a closer look.

A dead man's handle. Except the man holding it was dead, and it hadn't worked. Yet.

Not moving his feet, he scanned the inside of the domik. He needed a heavy weight or something to jam in the mechanism. It might be that the switch was never going to fall, but one possible alternative was that the slightest vibration might set it off. The wires that joined it both to the heavy metal cylinder and to the box under the chair would mean the Armageddonist would have the last, albeit brief, laugh.

There was welding gear by the domik's doors. Too unwieldy. The rest of the container was pretty much bare, save the table with its unstable load.

"Maddy?"

"Sam?"

"I'm going to need some wire. Stiff wire, like coat-hanger wire, or six-mil-squared copper cable." He could tie off the switch. That would hold until he could make a better job of it. "Sometime soon, okay?"

Still without moving his feet, he crouched down and peered through the Armageddonist's legs. By leaning over to both sides, he could see more of the object, and he mentally constructed a wire-frame model of it, to better see what it was.

A car battery.

He knew that it was simply inconceivable that one might hold its charge for two decades. There was staining on the floor around it, but that could have come from above rather than from a ruptured cell. By rights, he should just unscrew the terminals and kick the thing across the floor. It was as dead as the Armageddonist.

Petrovitch scratched at the bridge of his nose. Maybe he'd just wait for the wire. He straightened up again and peered at the bomb.

The Armageddonists mostly used old Soviet-era weapons, but this wasn't one of them. It had the distinct look of a home-made device, of the sort that were relatively simple to make, and could be set off just by being dropped at the wrong angle. Low yield, but more than enough to lay waste to everything for kilometers around.

There was tapping from behind him.

"Yeah?"

"I've got your wire."

"Throw it to me. Toward my feet, not my head. I don't want it to go anywhere near the body."

Madeleine occluded the outside. "How can you see… oh."

"Just throw the wire," said Petrovitch. "I've a list of stuff I need to make the bomb safe."

"Don't you think you should be leaving that to someone else?"

"No. No, I don't. I'm not leaving it to someone else because that someone else is going to take a day to get here, insist on an exclusion zone of thirty k that'll take a week to enforce across the river, cause

irreparable harm to the Freezone, then do precisely what I'm going to do now and expect to be treated like a *yebani* hero for the rest of his life."

The short coil of wire skittered tinnily across the floor and nudged his heels.

"Right. I want a head torch, wire cutters, a full box spanner set—including the little fiddly ones in the shape of a star, screwdrivers of all varieties, pliers big and small, a multimeter and a geiger-counter. Most of that you can find in the art college basement, and I know you know where that is. The geiger-counter: you'll probably have to go to a medical physics department at a hospital. Got all that?" Valentina would have a lot of it, but she was at the other side of the Freezone, hunting the CIA.

"You're enjoying this a little too much."

He stooped to retrieve the wire and felt its gauge. It was a little thin, but it'd do.

"I seem to live in a world where you trust me with an atomic bomb, but not with your heart. I guess I have to take pleasure where I can find it."

She hesitated at the opening. "I'll get you your things."

"Thanks. Do you want to tell Sonja about this, or shall I?"

"It's my job to tell her," she said.

"Is that a yes or a no?"

"You can do it. Somehow I think it'd be better coming from you."

"See you soon. If you can't find anything straightaway, call me so I can decide if I can do without it."

The shadow left the end of the container, and before he called the Chair of the Freezone, he decided to tackle the dead man's switch.

It was a simple task, but he had to do it right. He wound the free end of the wire around the nearest chairleg and pulled it tight so that he knew it wouldn't slip. Then he unwound more of the coil to stretch around the switch itself.

Dead, brittle fingers were wrapped around the handle, which should have flung itself back the moment conscious pressure had ceased. Something had prevented that. Petrovitch ramped up the gain on his eyes, hoping to see what that was.

The secret was at the elbow. The Armageddonist had wedged his arm against the back of the chair to relieve the strain on his muscles. Maybe he'd had a cramp. Maybe he just hadn't been ready. And some time after he'd completely negated the purpose of the bomb switch, he'd died.

"*Mudak.* Can't even get the end of the world right."

He looped the wire around the switch and the emaciated hand, and took up the slack, then gave it three more winds before slowly

drawing everything together. As the wire tightened, it bit into the dry, bloodless hand, cutting the parchment-colored skin.

Petrovitch watched dispassionately, only concerned with whether the underlying bones would break. He decided that they weren't going to, and he finished off the wire with bending it back down to the chair and fixing it to the same leg. He gave it an experimental kick. The wire held.

Next thing.

She was sitting at her desk, unaware that she was being observed. Her eyes were flickering across the screen in front of her, reading a set of accounts. Every time she came across an entry that she might later query, she frowned a little, eyebrows knitting together.

He coughed to attract her attention. "Madam President?"

"Sam?" Sonja sat back, now trying to focus on the tiny camera clipped to her screen. "Why are you calling me that? Where are you?"

"Regent's Park. We've got a problem. An official Freezone the-*govno*'s-hit-the-fan problem." He regarded the bomb. "And I'm officially telling you about it."

"Okay." Her face sharpened. "Tell me."

"I'm standing in Container Zero. It contains the body of the Last Armageddonist and the Last Armageddonist's home-made nuclear device."

If she was surprised or shocked, she didn't show it. She showed nothing at all. "Is the area secure?"

"No, but I don't want people down here mob-handed. It's a sure way of drawing attention to the fact we have a situation."

"Sam, the situation is happening whether we like it or not, and I'm sending you a squad of my guards. They'll be discreet."

"Maddy won't like that."

"She there with you?"

"Not at the moment. I sent her to assemble a bomb disposal kit."

A beat, then her voice dropped an octave. "Sam…"

"What? Sonja, this thing is live. I don't know what'll set it off, but I know I can make sure it won't go critical."

"It's been sitting there for years. Another day won't make a difference."

Petrovitch closed his hand around his forehead and scraped his fingers back through his hair. "Yes. Yes, it will. For one thing, we've opened the container. There was a dead man's switch that failed to work—I've made that temporarily safe—but there could be light-sensitive triggers, trickle-charging cells, old-fashioned mechanical booby traps. If this blows, we've wasted the year we've spent rebuilding and the next ten trying to decontaminate the Metrozone."

"We need an expert."

"*Yobany stos,* you sound just like her! Listen: this is a jerry-built gun-type assembly. It's not something you buy off the shelf. The people who made this are dead, Sonja, and no one can pick their brains. The design is simple and stupid and inefficient and unstable. It relies on nothing more sophisticated than bringing two subcritical masses together. That could happen if you so much as drop it. If you want to leave something like that sitting in the middle of the Freezone, then hey, you're the boss. You get to carry the can."

Sonja pushed back from her desk. The Freezone authority had co-opted the old Post Office Tower. The views from the top were commanding, and Petrovitch could see tiny points of light through the windows behind her.

"Can it be moved?" she asked.

"Without disarming it? Maybe. I don't know."

"Would you move it?"

"*Chyort.* No."

She stood up and looked out over the city, as she must have done from the Oshicora building. The difference was now she really did run it all. At least for the next two weeks.

"Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't screw up."

His mouth twisted into a grin. "Have I ever let you down?"

"No," she conceded. "But you let Michael down. He's been gone a year, and you still owe him."

"I'm working on it."

"I know: one brick at a time. I've been meaning to ask you: what happened this morning?"

"With the priest? The Pope wants to know if Michael has a soul."

"Does he?"

"I told him it didn't matter. I told him Michael was my friend and I was going to rescue him anyway."

"Good for you, Sam. Keeping an eye on the oil prices?"

"Not particularly."

"Down eighty dollars a barrel since lunchtime. OPEC are squealing."

"Which is stupid. Oil's too valuable to just burn it. They should be pleased."

"So now I have the Saudi secret service to worry about, too. Thanks." She sat back down, almost falling into the chair. "I miss these chats. We've been so busy, haven't we?"

"Time's coming—soon—when we won't be."

"You know that Madeleine's not the only woman in the world, don't you? If she doesn't want you, there might be someone else who

does."

Petrovitch scratched at his nose, even though that wasn't where the itch was. "You know me. You know I keep my promises."

"I know." She shrugged. "If only you were more corruptible."

"Yeah." He could hear the sound of an engine outside. "Better go. I'll let you know when I'm done."

When he'd closed the connection, he frowned. It wasn't a motorbike engine he was hearing. The noise ramped up suddenly, and a shower of sparks washed across the floor of the container from the welded-shut doors.

The edge of a cutting disc emerged through the steel and started to carve its way upward. The air vibrated and filled with smoke.

"*Ahueyet!*" Petrovitch reattached himself to Sonja's computer. "If you've sent your crew already, send more. Now." Then to Valentina: "What the *huy* are you doing in Enfield? I need you here!" And finally to Madeleine, and he had to wait for her to pick up: "Come."

By which time the sparks were almost to the top of the door, and he could barely see through the acrid, metal-tasting fog. The smoke caught in the back of his throat and made him cough. It was irritating his eyelids, too, but he could ignore that.

The flickering sparks died away, and so did the roar of the cutter. The ends of two crowbars hammered through the opening, probing and twisting, and after a few seconds the doors screeched open, the howl of ancient hinges being forced reverberating across the remains of the domik pile.

The sudden outflow of air sucked much of the smoke with it. It billowed into the darkening sky, and half a dozen figures stepped into the container.

"Doctor Petrovitch, please stand aside. We have no wish to harm you."

"The feeling isn't mutual. If you go now, you might just live." He had nothing to use as a weapon. They had the crowbars, the rotary saw, and several stout lengths of wood.

But they didn't stop to argue with him: they knew he'd called for help, and knew they only had minutes. Four of them went to the bomb, two—the biggest—stepped between it and Petrovitch. All of them just seemed like regular people: they could have been scaffolders, fitters, plumbers, caterers, drivers.

"Hey, hey!" Petrovitch saw them put straps under the bomb, and tried to push past to reach it. "Don't do that."

And while he was distracted, one of the men took his legs out from under him, hitting him across the back of his knees with the crowbar. He didn't fall, because the other one caught him in a headlock and reached around to the nape of his neck.

They knew exactly what they were doing. Petrovitch felt the cable in his head rotate and jerk out.

Then, and only then, did the pain hit him. Not just from being struck with a metal bar and half-choked, but from all the other injuries that he carried and hadn't been healed.

They dropped him, and the man swung the crowbar again. He was aiming for Petrovitch's skull, but struck his arm instead. A bone went crack.

"*Nu vse, tebe pizda.*" Petrovitch tried to work out where his feet were. He kicked out, then realized that wasn't the smart thing to do. "Okay. Stop."

"Sorry, Doctor Petrovitch. No time for that." They'd cut the cables from the dead man's switch and the battery. They had the bomb hanging free inside the straps. They were walking out of the container.

"I can't let you take it." He tried to stand, and put his hand down on the now vacant table. The jagged ends of the break further up his arm slipped past each other and threatened to puncture his skin.

And while he was gasping and gaping and gagging, they left.

7

He dreamed. It was so perfect, so beautiful. The fat, yellow sun was slanting off the sea, sinking toward the west and the wide, uninterrupted ocean. The grass he stood on gave way to white sand across a sinuous, nibbled line, and on that sand were children, six of them, and some of them were his. They laughed and they ran and they played some complicated game that involved throwing seaweed and catching shells. He watched them, and when he'd watched them enough, he vaulted down onto the sand; with a great monster's roar he set after them, scooping up a ribbon of green weed and waving it above his head as he sent them giggling and scattering down to the shore line.

So when consciousness returned, he struggled to remember where or when he was. His eyes slowly opened, and lit on Madeleine. She wasn't wearing her Joan robes, so it wasn't eighteen months ago and he hadn't just suffered a massive heart attack.

Then there was Valentina with her favorite kalash across her knees, and Lucy standing next to her, and a redhead who used to be a blonde: Tabletop, in her info-rich stealth suit. And Sonja. Petrovitch ignored what she was wearing and considered the fact that she looked like she'd swallowed a wasp.

He'd just lost an atomic bomb. She probably had a right to be pissed with him.

"*Pizdets,*" he said. His arm—his left arm—was stuck out at a stupid angle. While he was asleep, some sadist had fitted him with an aerial array that made it easy to pick up radio signals but impossible for him to change the angle of his elbow. Four encircling titanium rings were spaced down the length of his arm, locked together with cross-struts.

He lifted his arm from his shoulder. The iodine-stained flesh moved around the metal wires that were anchored in his bone. There should have been pain, but morphine had seen to that.

He searched for the clock in the corner of his eye. It had gone. There was no connection to the outside. He frowned and glanced up at the clock on the wall, busy ticking away the seconds. He did the maths stupidly and slowly, and came up with a guess that three and a half hours had passed; hours he was never going to get back.

He tried to sit up. With only one hand and a soft mattress to push against, he struggled until Madeleine stepped forward. She held him while she rearranged his pillows, then let him down gently against them. A moment later, she would be embarrassed, but for now she

was caught up in the act of caring.

"So," he croaked. His throat burned like he'd downed half a litre of cheap vodka. "The bomb's gone. You don't know where it is, or who has it. You don't know what they want with it or what they'll accept for its return. About right?"

No one contradicted him.

"Except that's not true, is it?" Petrovitch tried to adjust the surgical gown he was wearing, and found himself frustrated again by his lack of mobility. He'd been awake no more than a minute, and he was already wishing he'd insisted they'd amputated and grafted on a prosthetic.

"I don't get it," said Lucy. She looked from face to face. "One of us…"

"Yeah. One of you. Those men knew where I was, knew I was alone, knew how long they had, knew exactly how to disable me, knew there was a bomb there. They were prepared. They were ready. They weren't armed, but they knew I didn't have a *pushka* either: who, outside of this room, knows for certain I don't carry? That I've been ordered not to carry? They put me in a head-lock and unplugged me: only you lot know what that'll do to me."

Valentina pursed her lips. "Your wire is no longer secret. Is common knowledge, *da?* Maybe they get lucky."

"Lucky?"

She shrugged. "Unlikely. But I would look for reasons other than one of your friends has betrayed you. Start with those who cut Container Zero open."

"They've disappeared," said Madeleine. She leaned heavily against the wall, nudging the painting behind her out of true. "Vanished off the face of the earth, and I'm not going to be able to go and find them now."

Petrovitch turned uncomfortably toward her. "Because…"

"Sonja's sacked me," said Madeleine through clenched teeth. "Apparently, my judgment is in question."

"What the hell was I supposed to do?" Sonja's face contorted into several unlikely expressions before she exploded. "You lost the bomb. You lost it. You had it, and you lost it. You're head of security and you left one unarmed man alone with a nuclear bomb. It's not your judgment I'm questioning. It's your sanity."

Madeleine levered herself upright, which in itself should have been scary. "Sonja," she started.

But Sonja wasn't intimidated. "That's Madam fucking President to you. They could have killed him! That might not mean anything to a frigid bitch like you, but I actually care about him."

She'd gone white, all except the tip of her nose, which remained

stubbornly pink.

"I'm going now to try and clear up your mess. If I catch you within a hundred meters of me, I'll make sure someone shoots you. Is that perfectly clear?"

The only thing that was perfectly clear was Madeleine's desire to straight-arm Sonja through the wall. The effort to hold back was titanic, every muscle straining.

"Yeah, go on then," said Petrovitch from the bed. "This makes it so much better, doesn't it? If any of you were listening earlier, I said that you had no idea who took the bomb. Doesn't mean I don't. Up to the point where my mitigator was unplugged, I have a recording of what happened, including the six men who took the bomb. And in a couple of seconds I can tell you who they are and where they live. Lived. Three and a half hours ago."

"They took your rat," said Lucy. "It wasn't on you when we found you."

Petrovitch screwed his face up. "*Chyort.*"

"I'll get you a new one," she offered.

"Go and do it now. Something. Anything that'll do." He should have realized when he woke up. The drugs were making him dull. "I need to get out of this *yebani* place."

Lucy edged around Sonja and slipped out. She left the door slightly open, and they could all hear her receding, running footsteps. Petrovitch also caught sight of an Oshicora guard through the crack of light.

"I can do better than she can," said Sonja, though she didn't take her eyes off Madeleine.

"You've got more important things to do. And I'm sorry."

"Call me when you remember enough that's useful. Okay?"

"Okay."

With one last glare up at Madeleine, she flung the door aside and strode out. The guards fell in behind her, and by force of will, they swept the corridor clear ahead of them.

"I'm serious," he said, trying to attract the others' attention. "I need to get out of here right now. Someone tell me how long I'm supposed to wear this metalwork?"

"Six months." Madeleine's fists were still clenching and unclenching.

"You have got to be kidding." He stared at his arm. "Call the surgeons. Get them to take it off. Take it all off, up to here." He sawed with his free hand just below his left shoulder.

"Sam, no."

"There's a nuclear bomb loose in the Freezone. Someone close to me betrayed me. And I've lost my rat. Again. I cannot do anything

about any of those things with Arecibo sticking out of my body."

"Ari?" asked Valentina.

"Arecibo," murmured Tabletop. "Radio telescope. Puerto Rico."

"And you've been very quiet." Petrovitch struggled with the sheets, grasping a handful of them and pulling, but the hospital corners proved hard to dislodge. He frowned at her stealth suit that he'd thought locked away for safe keeping. But there she was, wearing it like a second skin again. "Anything you'd like to say?"

"I'm not allowed to talk to anyone but Tina, Lucy and you, and I'm never alone. I know I've said nothing that can be used to hurt you. So I'm just waiting for you to tell me what you want me to do." She tugged at the corner of her dyed hair. "The CIA would have killed you first, then mined the container before they left. It wasn't them."

Petrovitch had finally got the better of the bedclothes. "Anyone who doesn't want to see my bare arse had better get out now."

No one moved.

"Well, *mne pohui.*" He swung his legs out and tried to stand. He would have fallen had Valentina not caught him.

She dumped him back on the bed. "Where do you think you need to be?"

"Anywhere. Anywhere but here with this *govno* hanging off me."

"You need to think." She held him by the shoulders and gave him a shake. "You need a plan."

"I can't think. I feel like I've had half my brain ripped out through the back of my skull."

"Valentina," warned Madeleine, "put him down."

"No. This is important. You do not need computer. You are smart anyway. You live before you get implant. You remember that." She patted both his cheeks and stepped back.

"Right. You're right." Petrovitch glared at his arm. "Where's the break?"

"Separated fracture of the humerus, midway along," said Tabletop, still twirling her hair. "I read your notes. You had a chunk of bone three inches long floating free."

"So the extension on my lower arm is just for show?"

"Stability. You cannot—must not—use that limb for weight-bearing activities. At all."

"I still reckon I'd be better without it altogether."

Madeleine growled. "No."

"Tell me again why I should take your opinion into consideration?" He didn't turn around, just sat with his back to her. "We've been apart longer than we were together."

The temperature in the room dropped to below freezing.

"One of us has to say it," he said. "I've spent too long hoping

you'll come back to me. Either you will or you won't. Nothing I do or don't do will affect that one way or the other. But the situation we're now in means I'm going to have to make some decisions for myself."

"We can save the arm." Tabletop stepped out from the corner. "I'll get you a wheelchair."

Valentina picked up her rifle and slung it over her back. It was an automatic reaction; where one went, the other had to go. It was the law.

"Back soon." She gave a meaningful glance at Madeleine.

"I'll be fine." He nodded, feeling the chill on his naked back. "Does this hotel come with a dressing gown?"

"We'll find you one." Tabletop held the door for Valentina, and like a pair of ghosts they disappeared.

Petrovitch tried the floor again. His eyes told him it was flat and still, but as he slowly rose, he felt like he was on a ship at sea. "If losing my arm gives me a chance to get to the bomb before it blows, I'm sawing it off with a rusty blade. Do you understand?"

"Oh, you've made it very clear, Sam."

"So what are you going to do now?"

"Nothing that'll make you change your mind, I expect."

He rested his head on his chest. "How about stop acting like a *pizda staraya?* Sonja was right, and we were wrong: we should have had Container Zero locked down tight. We're supposed to be responsible adults, not a bunch of *yebani* kids hiding stuff from our parents and hoping they don't find out."

"You mean like you did?"

He slowly turned around, shuffling his feet. His arm refused to hang by his side, the series of rings forcing it away from his body, making him hold his shoulder awkwardly against the downward drag of the metal framework. He reached over and held the lowermost ring in his other hand.

"The two situations are completely different. People already knew about the bomb. It wasn't a secret, and we should have realized what that meant."

She gave a pained expression. "They were so quick."

"Yeah. They knew before we did. They knew, I guess, long before Container Zero was opened. You don't get to make yourself a nuclear power just because you haven't got anything better to do that evening." He tried to shrug, and found that impossible, too. "We were set up. By someone who knows both you and me very well."

"Bet Harry would know who."

"Maybe. He wouldn't have done anything about it, though. Not until it was too late."

"I do care," she blurted. "It's not true what Sonja said. I care so

much about you."

He thought she might cry. He thought he might cry. He took a deep breath. "Shame it doesn't seem to be enough anymore."

The door banged back to its fullest extent. Tabletop wheeled in a chair, cornering hard and scraping paint off the doorframe.

"Hop in." She stopped suddenly, and Valentina ran into the back of her. "Did I interrupt something?"

"Yeah. No. Whatever. Dressing gown?"

"Got a blanket. Best we could do." She brought the wheelchair closer and stamped on the brakes with the side of her foot. "I had to throw someone out of this thing."

"Is true," said Valentina. "Seat is still warm for your naked arse."

"As if this couldn't get any worse." Petrovitch attempted to lower himself down one-handed into the chair, and dropped most of the way. "*Chyort.* That hurts."

While Valentina artfully draped the blanket over his knees, Tabletop kicked the brakes off. "Okay. Next stop, physiotherapy." She popped a wheelie to turn him around, and started at speed toward the door.

"And you could stop being so cheerful. I'm not used to it."

She leaned in from behind him, so that her hair curtained his face. "I'm useful. At last. You don't know how good this feels."

Out in the corridor, he glanced behind him. Valentina was following at a jog. There was no sign of Madeleine.

8

The overhead lights flickered on as they entered the room. Each successive click and buzz revealed more of the modern torture chamber until it was laid bare in its full antiseptic glory.

Petrovitch shivered. The sign on the door had said physiotherapy, but now he wasn't so sure. "Are these things supposed to help people?"

Tabletop stood on the back of the wheelchair and sized up the equipment. "I don't know how I know what each one of these does, but I do. Sometimes I find myself thinking about something, and I suddenly find I'm an expert in it. And I never realize until I'm confronted by it."

"If they can wipe your memory, maybe they have a way of putting new ones in."

"So it seems. That device on your arm is called a Taylor-Hobashi bone fixator. One of these machines is designed to work with it."

She put his brake on and wandered between the benches, chairs and tables, running her hands over the metal and plastic, remembering thoughts that were not her own. Valentina squatted down next to him.

"Hmm," she said. It was her holding sound, what she did when she was trying to find the right words. "You are okay?"

"That's loaded with subtext, even for you."

"You have many problems. Too many."

"Are you suggesting you remove one or more of those problems, permanently?"

"If you were, hmm…"—her expression became flinty—"in charge. Then perhaps you would be able to act more freely."

"You want me to start a revolution against the Freezone."

"Against Oshicora. Freezone is good idea run by wrong people."

Petrovitch flexed the fingers of his left hand. He watched them curl and uncurl like thin white tube worms extending from their nest. "Yeah, well. Don't think I haven't thought about it. It would, I guess, be quite easy for me. Rally the troops, depose the leader, seize power. Shame it's not going to happen."

"*Nyet?*"

"Definitely *nyet.* And of course the Freezone is a good idea. It was my idea. That's why I've been a loyal servant of it, and why I'll stay one for the next week and a bit."

"What of future? Your future?" She looked pensive for the briefest of moments. "Mine?"

“Leave it with me. I don’t intend to disappoint either my friends or my enemies.”

She pursed her lips and nodded. “That is good.”

And that was it; the matter was concluded to her satisfaction. He’d deflected an attempted coup simply by saying no. He hoped that if Sonja ever found out, she’d be appropriately grateful.

Meanwhile, Tabletop was circling one machine that looked like a skeletal robot cut off at the waist. Her fingers were manipulating the two outriggers, bending them and twisting them, and feeling the way the joints moved in relationship with one another.

“This is it.” She beckoned Petrovitch over, and he allowed himself to be wheeled into position.

When he looked up, the thing towered over him. He had a flashback to the New Machine Jihad, of a construct of steel and hydraulics bending down to inspect him minutely.

“Nothing to be nervous of,” said Tabletop.

“You’re not sitting where I am.” He took a deep breath. “What do I have to do?”

“Just hold your arm out. I’ll do the rest.”

He raised his arm awkwardly, and she moved quickly and carefully, with unearned ease. She lowered the machine over him and clamped Petrovitch’s titanium rings to the metal skeleton until it provided all the support and he could just hang off it.

“Comfortable?”

It wasn’t, but he’d expected nothing else. “It’s fine.”

There was more: a harness that clicked into place around his shoulders and down his back. It was more than just like an exoskeleton: it was an exoskeleton, and he got the point of what she was trying to do.

“We’ll need to lose the right arm—not mine, the machine’s. And doesn’t this work off the mains?”

“The servos are twelve volts. You should be able to rig something up.” Tabletop opened several drawers in a nearby desk, searching for something. “Hex wrench. Five mil.”

“Madeleine should have mine.”

“I’ll keep looking,” she said, and spread her net wider.

“She doesn’t hate you, you know.”

“Uh huh.” Her voice was muffled by the cupboard she was in. “Did she tell you that?”

Petrovitch scratched his nose with his free hand. “Good point, well made.”

She looked over the top of the steel bench. “Her last act as head of security was to release this suit to me. She took the opportunity to make her opinion of me crystal clear.” Tabletop ducked back down

again, eventually emerging with a flat plastic case. “Let’s get this done.”

With Valentina taking the weight of the spare machine arm, Tabletop unwound the bolts that held it in place, then disconnected the cables from the motors at the shoulders, elbow and wrist.

The door banged open. A man in a white coat stood framed in the doorway.

“What… are you doing?”

After months of being used to scanning a face, running it through his software, coming up with an identity, Petrovitch was lost. The personal touch, the calling someone by their own name, was his signature move. It was his only move. And no matter how hard he tried, nothing would come.

So he gave up. “Ah, *chyort voz’mi.* We’re taking hospital property apart and modifying it so I can regain some basic function in my shattered left arm, which should allow me to at least attempt to drag ourselves out of the *pizdets* we’re in before we all die horribly. If I can find the *podonok* who did this to me on the way, it’ll be a bonus.” He smiled unpleasantly. “Any questions?”

“Doctor Petrovitch?” asked the man.

“If that was your question, may whichever god you believe in help us all. Who the *huy* did you think I was?”

He could see the mental calculations whirr behind his eyes. If that was Petrovitch, that must mean the one in the black form-fitting all-in-one was the CIA assassin, and the other one in the brown jacket cinched in at the waist and with the Kalashnikov across her back was the Russian gangster, hero of Waterloo Bridge.

“I’ll be going,” he said.

“Good choice,” said Petrovitch, and waited for the door to close. “*Mudak.*”

“Right.” Tabletop tightened the straps and checked the retaining bolts. “Can you stand?”

“With help, probably.”

Valentina stopped playing with the spare mechanical arm long enough to grip the spine rod and neck harness. The women heaved him up. Petrovitch leaned to the left, overcorrected, and eventually found upright.

“Heavy. Unbalanced.” The straps bit into his pale skin.

“You’ll feel the difference when I turn it on.”

Tabletop took up the little hand controller and powered it up. Immediately, the servos whirred and strained, taking the effort out of holding his arm up. He moved his shoulder slowly, and the sensors felt his tentative efforts, translating it into a smooth, steady arc.

“*Yobany stos.*” He looked down at his arm. “This might actually

work."

"I'm just going to loosen the elbow joint. Tell me if it hurts."

"Yeah. It's going to hurt anyway, so just do it."

She applied the wrench to the appropriate screws. "Okay. Bend your arm. Just a little."

It moved. Almost gracefully. The supporting rings of his cast and the metal spars of the physio machine made it look both ungainly and unlikely, but there was both power and speed hiding behind its appearance.

"We're going to need some hard-core battery packs. And lots of them. Rechargables." Petrovitch turned his wrist one way, then the other. "A very long extension lead's going to come in handy, too."

Valentina drew out her phone. "I will tell Lucy. She will find something appropriate."

"Tell her to meet us here, and we'll go to the art college together." He tutted. "We still need my tools, and Madeleine has most of them."

"We'll have to get them from her. You are not cutting your arm off just yet, so she should be grateful." Valentina walked to the far side of the room to carry on her conversation, and Petrovitch looked down at the rest of his body.

"I'm going to need my trousers. And boots. And I'm not certain I can tie my own laces anymore." He sighed, and motors whirred in sympathy. "We're going to have to wreck my greatcoat too. No way I'm getting this thing down the sleeve. Transport. You've got transport, right?"

Tabletop transferred her weight to one hip and handed him the controller. "Just because you hadn't thought of it until now doesn't mean it hasn't been thought of. Everything's in hand, Sam."

"I have issues. So sue me." He tried to bring his left hand close enough to his face to scratch at the bridge of his nose. Not quite. He growled. "Why are we still here? We need to be doing something."

"Then sit back down in the chair and I'll unplug you. Clothes, tools, car, college. Something will not happen unless we do everything in order. Focus, clarity, purpose."

"Is that what they taught you in the CIA?" Petrovitch eased himself into the wheelchair.

"It's what I remember, so it must have been. Put your arm across your lap. When I turn off the power, it'll become so much dead weight again."

He did as he was told, and railed against being ordered around at the same time. Tabletop pulled the plug: his arm went stiff and tried to fall across his knees. He hauled it up and balanced it across the sides of the chair.

Tabletop wheeled him back out into the corridor, Valentina, phone still glued to her ear, following.

They ran into a crowd of men and women waiting for them just outside the door. The men were all old, some very old; they all wore black cassocks tied at the waist with a red sash, and red skull caps balanced on their mostly hairless heads. The women were younger, vested in habits and wimples; hidden underneath was impact armor and Vatican-approved handguns.

Petrovitch closed his eyes. There wasn't enough morphine in the world to give him that sort of hallucination, so he supposed it had to be real.

"If," he started, then changed his mind. "No, scratch that: I made it perfectly clear to Father John that I do not want to talk to you. I have no idea how you persuaded the hospital to let you in, or who you bullied into telling you where I was: when I find out, I'll be kicking those responsible right up the *zhopu*."

He opened his eyes again. They were still there, ten of them, six cardinals and four Joans. They didn't look like they were going to go away just because he wanted them to.

"Can I introduce…" said the oldest man, his face lined and dark like a walnut. As he leaned forward, he met the barrel of Valentina's rifle coming the other way.

The Joans did their job quickly. The cardinal was dragged back behind them and they presented a solid wall to the threat. One of them thought about reaching for her gun. In the subtle coded way of the order, the decision was made together that it wouldn't be necessary.

"No, you cannot. You're a distraction, all of you. I'm not going to give you a moment of my time. Not now, not ever. Do not ask again. I don't need to know who you are, what you want, or how you think you can help me. You are simply irrelevant to me." Petrovitch adjusted his arm pointedly. "I'm guessing we're not going to have a firefight right here, though a hospital is as good a place as any—better in lots of respects—so if you'll excuse us, I'm sure you can see yourselves out."

The Joans didn't move, mainly because Valentina was still aiming her kalash at the head of the man she thought might be the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. They didn't wear name badges, making it difficult to tell.

"Tina, knock it off and get me out of this freak show."

Valentina managed to convey her reluctance by the slowness with which she lowered her gun, and Tabletop coughed politely to open up a way through.

"Watch your toes, your worships," she said.

“It’s Eminences,” grunted Petrovitch as he sailed between the phalanxes of black, white and crimson. “For all I care.”

The corridor was necessarily long, and the lifts were at one end. All the way down he could feel eyes boring into the back of his head. And then they had to wait: unheard of, because a networked Petrovitch would have summoned the elevator cars beforehand and made certain that one would be ready with its doors open.

While they waited, one of the Joans came to speak to him—whether she was sent or a free choice, he didn’t know. He did notice that she was the prettiest, even though it was supposed to be impossible to tell beneath the uniform. She wasn’t the youngest, but she had smiling eyes and a French Canadian accent, and not being the youngest meant little as there were few old Joans. The attrition rate was alarming.

“You married Sister Madeleine, didn’t you?”

Petrovitch looked up at her looking down. “Yeah.”

“Is she around?”

“That depends. Look, your Vatican mind-tricks won’t work on me. The only reason I’m giving you the time of day is because you’re a Joan and I have grudging respect for the order. Say what you want to say and don’t piss me about.”

She raised a half-smile. “I was your wife’s sponsor.”

He had to trawl manually through his memory. Everything, even that, was quicker when linked up.

“Marie. Sister Marie Clemenceau.” He glanced around her to the dark cloud of priests still outside the physio room. “How come you’re with those clowns now?”

She didn’t rise to the insult. “They needed someone with experience of the Metrozone. They asked me.”

The elevator arrived with a ping. The doors opened and Valentina scanned the space inside almost at the same time as Sister Marie. They swapped a flicker of mutual recognition.

Tabletop pushed him forward, and Valentina placed her booted foot against the door jamb. Petrovitch was turned around in the confined space so he could see out, could see the nun framed against the pale green wall behind her.

“No excuses, then. You knew what you were getting into, Sister.”

She looked solemnly at him with her laser-corrected eyes. “Yes, but it seems nothing could quite prepare us for the shock of actually meeting you.”

Despite the broken arm, and the pain, and the worry, and the urgency, the doors slid shut to the sound of Petrovitch laughing like a madman.

9

"Why can't I go to bed?" asked Lucy. She hauled on the door handle and kicked her way out into the freezing night air.

Petrovitch reached for his seat belt. "Because if we don't find the bomb before it goes off, you'll be worrying about more than your *yebani* beauty sleep." The belt retracted on its reel, snagging in the metalwork of his right arm. "*Pizdets.* This whole thing is *pizdets.*"

He freed himself and went for the door on his side of the pickup. As he reached for it, motors whirred and pistons breathed. In the corner of his eye, he'd installed a power meter to tell him if he was in danger of overloading his arm, and a little battery icon so he could check if he needed recharging.

His fingers tangled with the catch and he pulled. The door popped open, and he smelled mud and rust and winter. Valentina and Tabletop were already out, advancing on Container Zero, lit from behind by the vehicle's headlights. A group of Oshicora guards shivered in the midnight air, but grew more purposeful as the women approached. Politely, and with deep regret, the leader of the squad informed them they could go no further.

Petrovitch lowered himself stiffly to the ground and stalked over.

"Hey. There a problem?" He scratched at his nose. He still missed his glasses.

"Petrovitch-san, we have strict instructions," pleaded the guard's leader.

"I know. Which is why we're only going to be five minutes. I need to check something." He studied the man's face. "Takashi Iguro, isn't it?"

"Petrovitch-san, please. Miss Sonja was quite explicit. Only authorized personnel are to be allowed inside Container Zero." The man looked as if he was in pain at denying his hero, and started backing toward the closed doors of the domik. "Unless you are authorized, I cannot permit you to get closer."

Petrovitch nodded. "That's okay, Iguro. I'm not here to get you into trouble." He raised his right arm and patted him on the shoulder. His hand stayed there, effectively trapping him. "Sonja said 'inside the container,' right?"

"Yes, Petrovitch-san."

"That's going to be a problem. I lost something when I was here before. I think it was stolen, but I need to check." Petrovitch appeared to think about a way around the impasse for a moment, and drew the guard irresistibly toward him. "Why don't you go inside and look for

it, and we'll look outside. We're not breaking any rules if we just search around the container. And on top of it."

"We both know that you are," whispered the man.

Their heads were very close together.

"Do you know what was taken from here?" asked Petrovitch.

"I have heard… rumors."

"We both want what's best for the Freezone and for Miss Sonja, Takashi Iguro. Right now, that means you're allowed to enter Container Zero and search for my little computer, and me and my friends can take a look around outside." He blinked slowly and deliberately. "Right?"

"I suppose it might be."

"Thank you." Petrovitch released him, and Iguro staggered back. "Five minutes—then we'll be gone."

There could be no more objections, because Valentina was already combing the dirt by the doors to the container, seeing if anything had fallen there, and Tabletop was looking up at the sides of other, nearby domiks.

"They could have thrown it. Quick, easy." She reached into invisible pouches at her wrists and pulled out gloves made of the same material as her suit. "I'll need help."

Lucy trailed over. "So what can I do?"

"Stand there. Face the wall, put your hands against it and straighten your arms and legs." Tabletop slipped her fingers inside the gloves as she measured her run-up.

"Like that?" Lucy looked over her shoulder. "What are you going to do?"

"This."

She took three steps, each faster than before. One foot rose up onto the small of Lucy's back, the other lightly touched the nape of her neck, and abruptly Tabletop was waist-level with the top of the container, supporting herself on her palms.

Then she rotated her body into a handstand, and backflipped out of sight.

Lucy was staring upward, mouth open, but Petrovitch was having none of it.

"Just leave her. She's only looking for attention." He switched to infrared and turned slowly in a circle.

"But did you see…?"

"Yeah, I saw it. You realize that the CIA trained her to do stuff like that because it made her a better killer, not because they have a cheerleading squad." Petrovitch tilted his head. "Maybe they do. Finally, there's something I don't know."

"So what are we looking for?" Lucy peeled her hands off the cold

metal wall and rubbed them together until they were pink.

"My rat. Anything else that doesn't look like it belongs here."

"They had to drive the bomb away, right? Tire tracks?"

"Only useful if we had a list of which car had which tires. There are hundreds of thousands of abandoned vehicles in the Freezone. They could have used half a dozen of them, one after another, and because they know they're not being watched, they don't even have to be careful."

"Bummer."

"I'm cross-checking everything I can, but there are massive gaps in the data that didn't used to exist under the Metrozone Authority. It comes down to this; we have to stick our noses in the dirt."

They spent the next ten minutes peering uselessly at the ground, squeezing down the narrow gaps between domiks and finding that everything they touched sapped a little more heat from them. Tabletop would appear occasionally, a shadow leaping from one container to the next, making a soft booming sound as she landed that cut through the still night air.

Then she was behind Petrovitch, breathing hard.

"I've found something."

"Significant?"

"Could be nothing."

"But more than likely not."

She put her hand on her heaving chest. "Sorry. Spooked."

"It's fine. Take your time." He straightened up properly and arched his back. Almost his whole torso was strapped with equipment. A sub-standard replacement for his rat. Battery pack after battery pack, wired in parallel to give him the voltage, then in series to give him the power. The back brace and strapping for the exoskeletal arm. It was heavy, and he was tiring fast.

"Okay," she said, cycling her breath, in through her nose, out through her mouth. "It's the roof of Container Zero. We can haul you up on top…"

"Or I can bluff my way in, which will be a lot less embarrassing." Petrovitch pulled up a virtual phone and called Lucy and Valentina.

They walked back together, but Tabletop wasn't giving anything away. He'd be able to look at whatever it was with fresh eyes, but first he'd have to get past the punctilious Iguro.

The man himself was still searching the floor of the container, on his hands and knees and using a little flashlight that spread a faint beam no bigger than his fist. Petrovitch eased himself past the waiting guards and pushed his head through the cut in the door he'd made earlier.

"Hey again."

Iguro didn't look up, in case he missed something as he shuffled over it. "Petrovitch-san? Have you completed your task? Mine is almost finished, too."

"Another slight problem. One of my colleagues wants me to take a look at the roof, but I'm not going to be able to get up there, not in my condition." As he talked, he edged further inside, while Valentina and Tabletop stood behind him and prevented any intervention by the others. Lucy kept up a constant stream of chatter, distracting them.

"It will not be possible for you to enter, as I have already explained." Iguro inched forward, and his flashlight illuminated the toes of Petrovitch's boots. "Oh."

"Don't worry. I won't tell." He held down his good hand and helped Iguro up. He pointed to the flashlight. "Mind if I borrow that?"

Petrovitch held the light high, and swept the roof with it. He frowned, and did it again. When he saw it, it was obvious. So obvious, he wondered how he'd missed it when he'd first entered Container Zero; the Armageddonist's fault, undoubtedly.

Someone, at some point in the past, had cut through the roof in a perfect rectangle, freeing a plate two meters by three. Then they'd carefully welded it back into place. There were drill holes at the corners of the rewelded plate, also filled with molten metal.

"See that?" he said, his breath rising and breaking against the ceiling. "That shouldn't be there. Shouldn't be there at all."

"Petrovitch-san?"

The welds looked new. Not brand new, but not rusted either. Two weeks, a month maybe. "Just when you think it can't get any worse, it inevitably does."

He turned in the gloom of the container to the figure in the chair.

"Where is it, you *govnosos,* you *zhopoliz,* you *sooksin?* Tell me what you've done with the *yebani* bomb."

The Last Armageddonist grinned back. He'd not give his secrets away so easily.

Petrovitch leaned down, pressing his hands onto the mummified forearms as they rested on the arms of the chair.

"Come on, you *yebanat,*" he growled. "Where is it?"

He got nothing from the shrunken eyes or the shriveled tongue. No sign that he'd been heard, let alone understood, and it enraged him beyond reason. Petrovitch brought his left arm across his body and let loose with every last watt he could summon.

He backhanded the Armageddonist with the edge of his exoskeleton. A moment later, Petrovitch was on the floor, and a head, trailing the dust of two decades, lay rattling in a corner.

"Petrovitch-san. I think you should not have done that."

The faces at the container opening seemed to agree, but

Petrovitch didn't care. He awkwardly levered himself upright and glared at the decapitated corpse, its neck of brown flesh surrounding an island of white bone. "I wish you could have suffered more. Suffered as much as we did. But no, you died here, in the quiet and the dark, and you left us all your *govno* to clear up. Well, listen to me, you *huyesos:* I'm done with shoveling. I'm going to bury you and your kind forever, and then I'm not looking back. Got that?"

He put his boot against the chair and kicked it over backward. It crashed over, leaving a pair of leather shoes dangling obscenely at the end of two dried-out legs.

No one said anything. Petrovitch grunted with satisfaction at the destruction he'd wreaked and headed for the exit. He waited for it to clear, then pushed out, catching his arm on the container only once.

He was starting to get the hang of it: appreciate it, even.

Valentina ventured, "Are we done here?"

"Oh yeah. More than done." He stamped toward the car, leaving a wake of Oshicora guards.

Iguro called after him. "Petrovitch-san? How am I going to explain this to Miss Sonja?"

"Leave it with me. I'll tell her as part of my official role as Freezone Cassandra."

"But you have broken the Armageddonist."

"That, my friend, is the least of our problems." He hauled at the car door. "Don't tidy up. He doesn't deserve it."

He clambered in, and the others joined him: Valentina and Tabletop in the front, Lucy beside him.

"Sam? What happened?"

"We've been set up. Set up from the very start."

"Explain," said Valentina.

"I haven't got the energy. Find me a power source. Or vodka. Both, preferably."

She twisted around in her seat, and pointedly pulled out the keys from the ignition. She looked at him until he looked away, out of the window at the bright lights and black shadows of Regent's Park.

"Fine. I'll tell you as we go."

Satisfied, she started the engine, and reversed expertly between the remaining domiks until she reached the main road.

"At some point, probably while the domiks above were being recovered, someone cut down through into Container Zero. They made a hole more than large enough to take the bomb out, so I'm guessing that's what they did. It had gone long before the regular work crews got anywhere close to it."

The only sound was the rumbling of the tires on the resurfaced road.

Lucy pulled at her hair. “I don’t get it. If someone took the bomb, why would they bring it back? Why would they then steal it again?”

“There’s a whole lot of things I don’t get. But I’ll bet you a billion that the bomb I saw was a fake. No idea if it was identical, or even similar, but good enough that it fooled everyone into thinking it was the real thing. Even me.” Petrovitch grimaced. “Why the *huy* would the original thieves do that?”

Tabletop put her feet up on the dashboard. “What did you expect to see when you knew you were being taken to Container Zero? I know what I’d want to find, and I didn’t grow up with the legend.”

“There’d have to be the Last Armageddonist, and he’d have to be dead. And he had to have a bomb, ready to go off. Anything else would be too disappointing.” He spent some more battery power gripping the seat in front of him and hauling himself forward. “But that’s exactly what we would have found if we’d got there first.”

“Is it? Perhaps you’d have found absolutely nothing.” Her ghostly reflection in the windshield shrugged at the face leaning over her shoulder. “You said we were set up. You just haven’t taken the scenario to its logical conclusion.”

“*Huy tebe’v zhopu zamesto ukropu.*” Petrovitch let himself fall back. “None of it was real? And they still broke my *yebani* arm? I am seriously pissed now.”

“But why would someone want to steal a nuclear bomb they knew wasn’t real?” Lucy withered under Petrovitch’s baleful glare. “Oh, okay. We weren’t supposed to have figured this out, were we?”

“Of course, now that we have, they’re going to try and kill us.”

Valentina took one hand off the steering wheel and reached under Tabletop’s legs to the glove compartment. She produced an automatic handgun, and passed it butt-first to the back seat. Petrovitch wearily took it and laid it in his lap.

“There is another under your seat, Fiona.”

Tabletop curled her legs away and spent a moment feeling for cold, hard gunmetal taped to the upholstery.

Then Valentina reached into her jacket and pulled out a third gun, small and flat, warm from her body. “Lucy? Tomorrow I teach you how not to kill yourself with this, *da?* For now, be careful who you point it at.”

She took it as if it was a scorpion, and Petrovitch relieved her of it long enough to check the safety switch.

“Some dad I’m turning out to be.” Petrovitch punched the window glass, not quite hard enough to shatter it into a thousand crystal fragments, but enough to hurt himself. “*Polniy pizdets.*”

10

He slowly became aware of another presence in the shadows. They hadn't tried to shoot him, smother him or stab him, so he assumed they were benign; also, to get to him, they would have had to pass through a room containing Valentina, and he'd never caught her asleep yet.

Cables trailed into the bed and under the covers, and he'd installed alarms that would wake him if his nocturnal turnings accidentally unplugged him. Power was still trickling into his battery packs, so he wondered what had disturbed him. It wasn't time to get up. He had another hour and fifty-three minutes of electronically induced coma programmed in.

He could smell her. That was it: Madeleine's own scent had broken through to his consciousness.

"How long have you been there?"

"Five, ten minutes. I've been riding round and round for hours, and I couldn't think of anywhere else to go."

"That's me. The last resort." Petrovitch rolled onto his side, his left arm falling hard onto the mattress in front of him.

"Sam, don't. I'm not in the mood."

"Yeah, well. Neither am I." He opened his eyes and used some software to boost his vision. Madeleine was sitting with her back against the wall, her legs out in front of her and almost touching the bed with her heels. She had a gun in her hand, one he recognized from both today and much longer ago. "Thought you'd lost that."

"Wong sent it to me. Someone tried to sell it to him, and he recognized it. Told them he'd turn them in to the Metrozone authorities if they didn't hand it over." She flicked the magazine from the Vatican special into her hand and started counting the bullets.

"I miss him. No one can fry food to death quite like he does. I kept hoping he'd come across the river, but maybe business was too good where he was. Or he was avoiding us."

"The second one, I think. Can't blame him, either. His place was pretty much wrecked by the missile that hit Clapham A."

"If it's any consolation, you didn't lose a nuclear bomb today."

She rammed the magazine back home. "I don't need your sympathy."

"There wasn't a bomb. It was a fake. The whole Container Zero thing was a one-act play, starring us. If we hadn't been so completely taken in, we might have noticed the scenery wobbling."

She was silent for a while. "Certain?"

“As sure as we can be.”

“We?”

“The usual suspects.”

“What did Sonja say when you told her?”

“Ah.” He pushed himself up against the headboard. “I decided telling her would be a bad idea. So she doesn’t know.”

Madeleine sighed. “You just can’t stop keeping secrets, can you?”

“I tried very hard to give them up, but no. Though I do have my reasons.”

“Just like before?”

“You mean, I don’t want my friends being hunted down like dogs and killed? Yeah. Pretty much.” Petrovitch pulled the duvet up to his chin, exposing his skinny white ankles to the winter air. “Reasonable to assume that whoever set us up is willing to silence us if we don’t play along. Of course, that includes you now, too.”

She holstered her automatic at her waist and drew her knees up to hug them. “So why won’t you tell Sonja? Don’t you think she needs to know that when she gets a list of demands in the morning, backed by the threat of a nuclear weapon, she can pretty much laugh in their faces and tell everyone it’s business as usual?”

Petrovitch wiggled his toes. “You’re kind of missing the big point, Maddy.”

“Too tired for games, Sam.” She rested her head against the wall, tipping it up so her neck shone pale in the glimmering light. “Tell me.”

“What if she already knows?”

Her head snapped around. “What? Are you mad? She’s not going to do that to you.”

“We’ll see what morning brings.” He stretched. “I may as well get up.”

“Sam! You can’t honestly think that about Sonja. She,” and she struggled to say the words, “she loves you.”

Swinging his legs out from beneath the covers, he wondered what he’d done with his trousers. “I don’t think she’d let that get in the way of something that she really, really wanted. I also think the others would appreciate it if you kept your *yebani* voice down. It’s half two in the morning.”

His trousers were on the floor near the en-suite bathroom door, his boots by the window, and his mutilated coat thrown over a chair. He hadn’t bothered about his pants, and taking his T-shirt off would have required an embarrassing amount of help.

He walked around the room, trailing cables and collecting clothing. Even though he hadn’t bothered turning the light on, he was still aware of Madeleine’s forensic gaze.

“For all I know,” he said, “Sonja thinks it was me and will try to have me arrested—though not by you, obviously. It could’ve been the remnants of Tabletop’s CIA cell, with or without her knowledge. It could have been you.”

She let out a strangled gasp.

“Come off it. Don’t tell me you couldn’t have organized something like this: you’ve got the contacts, the opportunity, the skill. Valentina? She’d have to be in league with Tabletop, because they’re never apart, but the pair of them could brew up a scenario like that. About the only one I don’t think could’ve had anything to do with this is Lucy, and then I’m not so sure.”

She got up and stood over him while he tried to get his second leg into his trousers. It wasn’t as easy as he remembered it being.

“Why would I do something like that? Why would any of us?”

“I’m not saying you have. I’m saying you could. It’s a compliment, really.” He frowned: it probably wasn’t a compliment at all, but he let it stand. “As to why? How the *huy* should I know? What would anyone want to do with a dummy atomic bomb?”

“You don’t even know that. You’re just guessing.” Fed up with his inept attempts at dressing, she batted his hands aside and pulled up his trousers for him. “For all you know there’s a real bomb out there.”

“I’m calling *chush’ sobach’ya* on that. Someone cut into Container Zero long before we showed up, yet what did we find? Exactly what we wanted to see.” He had socks tucked in the top of his boots, but there was no way he was going to be able to manage them. He hissed at his own incompetence.

Madeleine knelt down on the floor next to his feet and angrily shook out the socks from the crisp balls they’d become. “When was the last time you changed these?”

“It’s not like anyone’s going to get close to me, are they?”

“Shut up and point your toes. Where can you possibly be going at this time of night, anyway?”

Petrovitch grunted as she dragged each sock on in turn, revealing two extensive holes in the heels.

“Oh, Sam.”

“They’re the only pair I have. And why do you care anyway? You left me, remember?”

“I care that you smell. I care that you have just one pair of socks. I care that some bastard smashed up your arm and your first thought was to have it amputated so you could replace it with shiny, shiny metal.”

“Didn’t though, did I?” He felt with his feet for the openings of his boots. “Instead I end up with this pile of *govno* hanging off me and I can’t even put on my own *yebani* trousers anymore.”

"Or tie laces." She dragged the loose ends on his left boot tight and started to wrap them crossways through the hooks. "So where are you going?"

"Out."

"Out?"

"Out," he said firmly. "You can come with me, if you want."

"Why would I want to do that? And I cannot see what I'm doing." She dropped the laces in disgust and stood up. She had to slap the wall several times before she found the light switch.

With the light on, the room was revealed in its bare, vaguely squalid glory. Despite being part of a luxury suite in a luxury hotel, there were still fragments of glass embedded in the carpet near the repaired windows, ripped wallpaper hanging in shreds, curtains like lace, a cracked mirror over the dressing table. Empty bottles of vodka stacked up in the unemptied bin, and a half-full one trembled next to a single smeared glass.

Madeleine shook her head, then came back to the bed. She knelt again to her task, and Petrovitch could see the stubble either side of her mane of plaited hair.

"Sister Marie sends her regards."

She lost the knot and had to start again.

"She's here?"

"She's with the God-botherers from the Inquisition. They tried to bounce me at the hospital: I didn't talk to them, but I talked to her. I got the impression she wanted to meet up with you."

"I know where they're staying." She moved on to the second boot. "The Jesuit's place in Mount Street."

"*Chyort.* That's just around the corner." He felt uncomfortable at them being so close. "Is that deliberate?"

"No idea. Most of the cardinals in the Congregation are Jebbies; default choice, really." She finished his lacing and patted the side of his leg. "You're done."

"Thanks," he muttered.

She looked up at him. "If you think someone's trying to kill you, why are you going out alone? I'm assuming it's alone. No one else seems to be stirring."

He leaned over and dug his hand under the pillow. He came back with the gun Valentina had given him earlier, and shoved it in his waistband. "About this time, every night, for the past eleven months—since I got out of hospital with my new eyes—I've been doing a job."

"One which doesn't mean you leave the hotel?"

"One that means you don't see me leave the hotel." He fed his left arm through the hole in his greatcoat, and shrugged the rest of it on. "I know you've been watching me. I know when you've been watching

me, too. Probably that's why you have no idea where I go or what I do."

He used her shoulders to get him off the mattress, and collected his courier bag. It bulged as he slung it around his neck.

"And you want me to come with you? Why now?"

"Because you're no longer head of Freezone security, and you don't have a statutory obligation to report breaches of UN resolutions three-eight-seven-two and three-nine-three-six anymore." He reached under his T-shirt and disconnected himself from the mains electricity, dropping the connectors on the floor and scraping them to one side with the edge of his boot.

Her hand went to her mouth. "What have you done?"

"I haven't done it yet. Which is why I have to go out every night. I should be finished in time, I think." He patted his bag. "And you'll never find out how I intend to pull this off unless you follow me."

She rocked back on her heels and rose. "Go on. Lead the way."

Petrovitch allowed himself a satisfied snort and turned the light off. He compensated for the sudden darkness; she couldn't. She walked into the back of him.

"That's me."

"Sorry."

"Why can't you see in the dark like normal people?"

"I've got night-vision goggles back on the bike."

"That doesn't count, and it doesn't matter anyway. Take my hand."

She couldn't find his hand, so Petrovitch had to grab hers instead, if only to stop it flailing around. Skin on skin contact. It burned him, and he had no way to block that kind of pain.

He opened the door to the rest of the suite. Lucy had her own room, while Tabletop slept on a requisitioned army cot behind a screen. Valentina lay stretched out on the sofa, covered by a blanket. The barrel of her propped-up AK stood out against the uncovered window, and her open eyes reflected the merest glimmer of light.

Petrovitch raised his hand in acknowledgment, and Valentina blinked. She'd never once asked him what he did, and he realized that it wasn't indifference, but the sort of trust that money could never buy.

Out in the corridor, the lights detected their movement and flickered on. They were still holding hands, which was awkward. He couldn't tell if it was going to be more difficult to let go or keep hold.

She decided for him. With a final squeeze, she released herself. "We're not a couple of kids anymore."

But that was exactly how he felt, and he wondered if he'd ever grow up. In the end, he turned away from her and headed not for the

main elevators, but the emergency stairwell at the far end. He shoved the fire door open and started trotting down the flights of cold concrete stairs. It seemed strange that after all the times he'd done this, there was another pair of footsteps following.

He passed the sign for the ground floor, and kept on going into the basement, through the laundry, past all the storage areas and the patchboards for the electricity and the central heating and the pumps, into a narrow passageway that carried pipes along the ceiling low enough to make Madeleine stoop as she walked.

Petrovitch strode purposefully on toward a locked door that barred their way, and felt for the key in the depths of his bag.

"Once we're through, watch your step. It's a bit slippery." He opened the door, and a hollow breath of stagnant water and dark mud stole in. "You get used to that."

She took his hand again as she stepped out into the black space beyond, the mud sucking at her feet. "So where are we?"

"Underground car park at Hyde Park Corner." He paused to adjust his vision, and led her splashing to where, amid a sea of rubble, scaffolding appeared to prop up one corner of the roof. It was covered in tatty blue plastic sheeting, which he drew aside for her and ushered her in.

Behind it, another piece of plastic covered the wall. He lifted it up and walked through into a rough cave that shouldn't have been there. The sheeting fell back behind them.

He'd installed lights, and when he fastened the bulldog clip to the battery terminal, they winked on in a line that led along and down, out of sight. He'd made a tunnel, just about big enough to shuffle down when hunched over.

"Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair," he quoted, in the absence of anything else to say.

Madeleine took a moment to stare in wide-eyed wonder. "You did all this?"

"Yeah."

"How the hell did I not find out about it?"

"Because I'm very good at covering my tracks. The tunnel supports are from an over-order, the lighting rig is built from spare parts, the anti-gravity buckets I use to shift the spoil I make myself. I borrowed surveying lasers for keeping me straight and for telling me how far I've gone."

Her shoulders sagged. "But I'm the head of security."

"Were," he corrected, and tossed a yellow construction worker's hat to her. "You take this. I'll just have to remember to duck."

"You couldn't have done all this by hand. You just couldn't have."

Petrovitch bent down and started along the tunnel. "Well, if it

wasn’t me, maybe a wizard did it.”

11

Petrovitch crept downward, steadying his progress by holding on to the metal beams of the tunnel supports. Madeleine, rather than facing the steep incline head-first, turned around and backed down, searching the cool, damp rock and mud for any handholds that she could find.

He waited for her at the next level, where his tunnel broke through a thick brick wall.

"There's a drop on the other side. Not far, but if you're not ready for it…" He put his feet on the lip of the hole and jumped off into the darkness. From where he now stood, Madeleine was framed by the light behind her, crouched and uncertain.

"What is this?"

"It's the Tyburn river."

"I've never heard of it."

"That's the beauty of using it. No one can follow me down a river lost to memory."

She looked longingly back at the faint string of light that ran back up to the car park. "You found out about it."

"That's because I'm brilliant." He shrugged. "And I was looking for it, too. The deep underground lines are full of water and collapsing in on themselves, but rivers are supposed to be there. They fill up when it floods, and they empty when it doesn't."

She smelled the air. "Are you standing in shit?"

"Me? No." Petrovitch moved his feet to either side of the thin ribbon of glassy water flowing down the center of the tunnel. "It's a sewer, too, but hardly anyone's been using the mains to flush their *govno* away for nearly a year. It's as clean as it's going to get."

"And you have one—count them—one pair of socks."

"Meh. They dry out." He reached into his bag for the wind-up flashlight he kept there. He gave the handle a few twists, and switched the blue-white beam on. The curve of the brickwork overhead shimmered with reflections, while the walls glistened and shone. A channel was cut into the floor, and it contained the slow-moving stream of weedy-green water completely.

Madeleine lowered herself carefully into the culvert. "Go on, then. How far?" She stood up slowly, and discovered that the roof was high enough even for her.

"About five hundred meters and no surprises. They knew how to build stuff in those days."

"And how old is this? Before I risk my neck."

“The newer parts are a hundred and fifty, two hundred years old.”

“Newer? Terrific.”

“C’mon.” He banged his fist against the brickwork. “Second World War, the New Machine Jihad, cruise missiles. Nothing we want to do is going to bring it down.” He turned the flashlight against the run of the river. “We go up there. Doesn’t take long. Need the buckets first, though.”

Ten large buckets, battered and dirty, were stacked in two equal piles just inside the tunnel. They were heavy enough while empty; when full, they were a fearsome weight. Short lengths of thick rope were tied to each handle in turn. Madeleine went to lift both piles, while Petrovitch reached into the topmost bucket and pulled out a sphere. He flicked a switch, and the buckets clanged into the cool, damp air.

“Sure I mentioned these,” he said, and went to turn on the second set of buckets. He tied them together, and pulled them along behind him like a pair of reluctant dogs.

The one intrusion of modernity into the Victorian construction was the thin cable stapled to the glazed brick roof. It ran from the hole the entire length of their walk along the underground stream. Though there were side tunnels and places where rusted ladders led upward toward the hidden surface, the cable ran unerringly along in an unbroken line.

Then it disappeared at right-angles to the line of the river, through another dark hole made near the upper part of the wall.

Petrovitch gave the flashlight another wind, and the light pulsed in time with his efforts. “I had to make the opening above what I could expect the water level to rise to when it rained. I almost got it right, too. Last autumn was a bit of a *pidaras,* so I lost a week or two just bailing everything out.”

Madeleine raised herself up and peered through the gap. “I cannot picture you down here with a pickaxe and a shovel.” Her voice echoed in the space beyond.

“It’s the twenty-first century. Pickaxes are obsolete.” He threw his bag over the lip of the hole, then shoved the buckets through. They blithely drifted on until they hit something solid, then banged around until they were still.

He tried to climb up after them. His feet slithered on the tunnel side, but his left arm was proving an impediment. He let himself slide back, then edged one foot closer to the top. But he couldn’t do the splits, and he had to admit defeat.

“Need a hand?”

“May as well, since you’re here.”

She put her arms around his waist and lifted him off the floor, high enough that he could flick his legs over the edge of the hole and sit on the brickwork. She waited for him to ease himself down, then vaulted the wall in a single leap.

"What is this? 'Everybody laugh at the cripple' day?" Petrovitch crouched down to clip the lighting circuit in the new tunnel to the waiting battery. "Why don't I just give the hospital a call and tell them to prepare for an amputation?"

"Sam…"

"Yeah, well. This thing was your idea. You could cut me some slack." He straightened up, pressing a hand into the small of his back. "It's uncomfortable, awkward and it's always there. It does some things better, like hitting people really hard, but the stuff I need it to do now? It's not fantastic. Frankly, I'm bored with it already."

"Look, I'm sorry," she started, but he cut her off.

"Yeah, yeah. I know. Come on, we're almost there, and the clock's ticking." He scooped up the handle on his bag and trailed it after him down the slope toward the tunnel's blind face.

They had left the river behind; the noise of the trickling water, the drips from the ceiling, the occasional soft moan of the wind blowing up through the vast labyrinth had all been silenced. It was just the two of them, and the sounds they made: their breathing, the scratch and creak of material, the unexpected rasp of the Velcro patches on Petrovitch's courier bag when he opened it again.

"I came up with the plan while I was lying in hospital waiting for them to fix my eyes. I figured I needed to do three things: get Michael out, blindside the UN Security Council, and make it look like I was doing neither. Doing both one and two, maybe half a dozen ways of managing that. All three? That's where the standing on the remains of the Oshicora Tower every day came in. I'm in full view of the world, in defiance of two UN resolutions, picking up a rock and throwing it away." He snorted. "They installed cameras on the nearby buildings to watch me better, in case I got carried away and brought in trucks and earth-movers, in case I actually got serious. Didn't occur to them to install seismometers. Not while they could see me."

"But if you don't dig?" Madeleine pressed her fingers into the tunnel wall, a dense aggregate of gray-yellow clay and sand. She could scrape the surface layer away, but it was hard work. "Don't tell me you use explosives. It's that Valentina, isn't it?"

"Leave Tina out of this. She has no idea what I do or where I go, just that I go and do something. If I needed an inexhaustible supply of semtex, I'm pretty certain she could've arranged it, just as I'm pretty certain she'd have got found out by you." Petrovitch sat back against a prop. "Home-made stuff, sure: brew it up by the vat load, until we

leave a smoking crater where our bomb factory used to be, and it's not like we can pop down to the shops for precursor chemicals."

"So how do you do it? How, on your own, could you have done all this?"

He revealed his hand, and in it was a small black resin sphere, chased with silvery lines.

"An anti-gravity device."

"No." He hefted it and held it out for inspection. "This is a singularity bomb. See, it's a touch smaller, and the pattern on the surface is different—different inside too, of course."

Madeleine couldn't see because she was edging back up the tunnel. "Just put it down, Sam."

"It's fine." He tossed it from hand to hand, not remembering for a brief moment that it was going to be difficult for him to catch it again. His arm shot out with a whirr of motors, and the sphere dropped neatly into his outstretched palm. "Excellent. Anyway, it's not plugged in. Perfectly safe."

He pushed a thick nail into the blind face of the tunnel, and knocked it in firmly with a lump hammer.

"You do this every single night?"

"Yeah. Don't need as much sleep as I used to. I program myself for a few hours' deep sleep, and I seem to manage. Because of that, I am now, according to my calculations, under the Oshicora Tower." He spooled some double-stranded wire from a hidden reserve inside his bag and stripped the ends with his teeth. He spat out the plastic sleeving. "I only had Old Man Oshicora's word for this, but he said 'below this building' when he talked about the quantum computer he used to run VirtualJapan. The tower went up in twenty-twenty, and there's no record of a retro-fit. Which means that somewhere in the foundations, there's a room large enough to fit the computer, an independent power supply and all the cooling it needs."

She came a little closer. "You could be burrowing down here forever, trying to find it."

"Except I'm not looking for the room. I'm looking for the shaft that connects it to the tower. It has to be wide enough to get technicians and equipment down to it, and the computer up if there's a problem." Petrovitch carried on working, using conducting glue to stick the bare wire to the bomb and holding them in place while they set. "And thanks to the miracle of ground-penetrating radar, I know that that very shaft is a meter and a half straight on."

Closer still. "You honestly think you can just do this?"

"Yeah. Who's going to stop me?" He gave the wires an experimental tug, and was satisfied they'd hold. "Unless you're going to turn me in, I'm pretty confident no one will know I was even here."

She was opposite him, face to face in the half-light. “But what are you going to do with Michael?”

He raised his eyebrows and blinked repeatedly. “You know, I hadn’t thought that far ahead. Here I am, busting my *yajtza* to secretly rescue my friend from his concrete tomb, making sure that none of my friends could possibly be indicted as war criminals by the simple expedient of not telling them what I was doing, and I forget to consider the two Security Council resolutions calling for his immediate death should he ever escape. What a *mudak*.”

“Sarcasm doesn’t become you,” she said, even as she tried to suppress a smile.

“Yes, it does. My voice is permanently stuck between sarcastic and condescending, no matter how hard I try for the dizzying heights of irony. Never mind.” Petrovitch pulled a battery out of his bag and dangled it in front of her eyes. “Let’s do some science.”

“I’ve missed you.”

He had a retort ready. It was on the tip of his tongue and almost out, but he realized in time that the game had changed.

“Yeah. Well. I’m still the guy who hid an AI from his wife and thinks he did the right thing. And until I invent a time machine, I can’t go back and do it differently. Though there is a school of thought that says if time machines were going to be invented, our past would already have been altered, so maybe I did tell you and it was such *pizdets* I had to create an alternative timeline where I didn’t tell you in order to put it right again.” Petrovitch succeeded in distracting himself. “If this is the best of all possible worlds, it doesn’t say much for the others.”

She enfolded his hands with hers. “I’ve really missed you.”

He shivered. “Talking geek at you always made you horny.”

Madeleine didn’t deny it. “Everybody knew about Michael before I did. I was upset. Really, deeply hurt that you hadn’t told me. The more people asked me, the worse it got. Reporters would needle me with it whenever I made any sort of public statement. It got me so angry, the only way I could deal with it was—”

“To leave me. I know.”

“We’ve really fucked this up, haven’t we?”

“That depends,” said Petrovitch. “We’re fifteen meters below a collapsed building, crouching in a small tunnel cut through unstable quaternary alluvial deposits using miniature black holes, looking for a concrete pipe that might be blocked by fallen masonry, at the bottom of which could be a very crushed computer, while above ground, someone wants us to believe they have a live nuclear weapon ready to re-enact the attack on Paris.” He watched her face fall, then added. “But we’re here together. Where else would I rather be?”

“Martinique?”

“Big volcano. I like my tropical paradises tectonically stable. And mostly above sea level before you suggest an alternative. I remember a conversation I had with Michael—several conversations really, because he’d keep coming back to the same question. He wanted to know about love, and how it worked, and what it looked like, and what it meant. He wanted answers, and I was bad at giving them. That’s not new, though.”

He looked down at his hands, covered by hers. He had cracks and cuts and burns on his, and her nails had been gnawed down to the quick.

“What I’m trying to say is that he kept on asking me why I was doing this or that, risking my neck trying to find you, and telling me that the only thing that could possibly make sense of it all was that I loved you. And I wouldn’t have it. Until, eventually, it turned out he was right after all and it had taken a *yebani* machine to make me realize the truth of it. I never told you, because after that, everything between us got so impossible, I didn’t want to play that card; it wouldn’t have been fair. You were so very angry with me, and I wasn’t in any position to say you were wrong.”

He looked up again to find she was crying. He could do that; he could also fake it by squeezing excess lubricant over the surface of his eyes and blinking it away, but it was a cheap trick, and not worthy of either her or him.

He had rendered her completely speechless, though, so he kept on talking. “So, in answer to your question: yeah. We fucked it up. Doesn’t stop me from hoping that we have a choice about whether we keep on fucking it up or not. I choose that we don’t, but it’s really up to you. It always has been.”

Petrovitch ran out of steam entirely. Madeleine was holding his hands so tightly that the corners of the battery were making holes in his skin, and the contacts touching his damp skin were leaking current. His artificial middle finger was starting to spasm.

“*Yobany stos,* woman, say something.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

“Okay?”

“Okay,” and in a stronger voice, “we’ll try to stop fucking it up.” She let go of him and scrubbed at her cheeks, sniffing.

Petrovitch eased his fingers apart and managed not to wince. The battery dropped to the ground, and Madeleine picked it up.

“Remind me again why we were down here?”

12

"Petrovitch? Wake up. Is problem."

He sat up. With all the electricity flowing into him, he wondered if he ought to use some to jump-start his brain.

"Problem?"

"*Da.*"

He booted up his eyes. Valentina was crouched next to him, on his side of the bed, pale face and severe ponytail the only of her features visible. It was starting to get light outside, but it was a west-facing window.

His side of the bed. He looked down to his right. Madeleine was laid diagonally across the mattress, head on the pillow and facing away from him.

"Okay. Give me a minute. I'll be right out."

He waited for Valentina to slip silently out, leaving the door ajar, before lifting the covers slightly. It appeared that both of them were naked. The cold air against Madeleine's back made her murmur and turn slightly: Petrovitch shuffled off the bed and tucked the duvet down around her.

He unplugged himself and threw one of the former hotel's luxury dressing gowns over him, right arm through the sleeve, left arm across his body with cold metal against bare skin.

When he padded barefoot into the suite, he picked up the tension in the air. Tabletop was sitting at a virtual keyboard, staring up at a flat screen stuck to the wall, while Valentina was leaning over her shoulder, dabbing at the graphics interface with a red painted nail.

"So tell me the worst."

Tabletop gave up her seat, and Petrovitch gratefully fell into it, holding his dressing gown closed with one hand.

"This turned up, five minutes ago, on the ENN site. They say they got it from a Ukrainian server, but I haven't been able to check that because the original source is now unreachable."

"Got the IP address?"

"This window here." She tabbed it to bring it to the front, and Petrovitch set his agents on it.

The video clip on the news site was poor quality: grainy, full of compression artifacts, really shabby contrast: like it had been done on an old phone in low-light conditions, which it probably had.

In form, it resembled the usual extremist showcase, with three masked figures stood in front of banners proclaiming jihad. Vital differences were the kind of jihad being promoted and the long metal

cylinder on the floor in front of them.

"We are the New Machine Jihad," said—shouted—one of the men, though telling which one was difficult, as they all had their mouths covered and they were using a really crappy pick-up.

"I thought I was," muttered Petrovitch, and Valentina shushed him.

"We have a message for the world. Prepare for the New Machine Jihad!"

The man on the right stepped forward and reverently showed a handheld's screen to the camera. The image on it was lost in the wash of pixels, but he came closer and almost pressed the handheld to the lens.

The ghost of a human face rose from the noise. "I am the New Machine Jihad. I am. The New Machine Jihad. Prepare. For the New Machine Jihad. Come to me. Come to the New Machine Jihad. Release the New Machine Jihad. Prepare."

The face, like ice, melted back into the depths.

"The Machine has spoken," shouted shouty man. "Free the New Machine Jihad from its prison or we will strike. You have twenty-four hours to give your answer."

The third man, silent and still up to that moment, walked toward the camera, behind it, and the clip finished.

"*Chyort.*" Petrovitch sat back and scrubbed at his stubble. He was pricked with cold sweat. "Just when you think you've worked out the way the world turns, it throws this at you."

"That's the fake bomb, right?" Tabletop backed the clip up for another run through.

"Yeah. Why didn't they ask for money or drugs or guns, or a small African country? This… this is going to be more difficult to laugh away."

"Why in particular?"

"Because," said Petrovitch, "that sounded too much like the New Machine Jihad for comfort, right down to the way it made no *yebani* sense at all. And there's something about this guy…"

He scrolled his way through the file to the very end, where the camera was turned off. A few frames before, the face of the approaching man became fractionally more visible.

He'd been a lot thinner. And darker, too, burned by the sun and the wind and rain. But he had something drawn on his forehead that was familiar—a circle drawn in thick machine oil, that resembled the black cogs painted on the white sheets hung up behind them.

"I know him. I thought I'd killed him: well, I thought he'd died, anyway, since I left him unconscious on the ground right before the Long Night. Looks like I didn't kick his *yajtza* hard enough."

Valentina walked to the screen and stared up at the face. “Who is he?”

“The Prophet of the New Machine Jihad. It used to talk to him through a standard mobile, and he thought he was communicating directly with a god. He greeted me as a true believer at first, which made it a bit awkward when he realized I was trying to take the Jihad down.”

“Which you did.”

“Yeah. That’s what I thought, too.”

“Either you did, or you didn’t.”

“I got that *sooksin* Oshicora to erase himself. All that was left was the pattern, so there is no way that this could be the original New Machine Jihad.” Petrovitch clenched and unclenched his fists. “So where the *huy* is this coming from?”

“Michael?” Valentina turned and faced the room, hands on hips. “Could this be default state of artificial intelligence?”

“Michael has no link with the outside world. It’s not like I haven’t tried every way in, but the connection is physically broken. It’s just not possible for him to get out.”

“That is answer you want.”

Petrovitch stood up and started to pace the floor. He reached a wall, turned and came back, and found the chair in his way. He kicked it aside with a growl.

“The New Machine Jihad leaked through its firewall: the networking was complete and the software wasn’t strong enough to contain it. This is different. The actual fibre-optic cable has snapped and the nodes are dead. How can an AI transmit a signal in that state?”

“It cannot. And yet you suspect this,” and Valentina tapped the screen behind her, “to be Jihad.”

Tabletop righted the chair again. “You’re too close to this, Sam. I think they’re playing you again.”

He took a deep breath and forced himself to stop. He rubbed his knuckles against his teeth and stood with his head bowed.

“Okay,” he said eventually, “let’s assume you’re right. The first act is Container Zero; a bunch of crazies beat me up, grab the bomb and disappear. In act two, scene one, the demands are made: free the Jihad or we’ll nuke the Freezone. We’ve got a video that shows exactly what I—not you or anybody else—what I want to see. So assuming I’m the target of all this, what is it that they expect me to do now?”

“I imagine you’re in the best position to answer that,” said Tabletop. “I’ll put on some coffee.”

Petrovitch perched on the edge of the chair again. “Do you think

Sonja's seen this?"

"If she has not, she will soon." Valentina looked around at the frozen image of the Jihad's prophet and scowled. "You must tell her bomb is false."

"And that's becoming less and less important." He chewed his lip. "These guys are good. Really very good. I've spent a year trying to wean people off the idea that Michael is the Jihad under another name, but in less than a minute all that work's been undone. Every day, same time, I've climbed up the Oshicora Tower in defiance of the UN Security Council. If I do it today, there's going to be a *yebani* riot."

"Perhaps that is what they want."

"Chaos is too easy to arrange. There's something more going on here, and I hate the feeling that someone's deliberately trying to back me into a corner until I've got just the one option left." He raised his voice so that Tabletop could hear. "Last time it was the American government."

"Hey," she called back, "they didn't tell us, either. In fact, they tried to kill us too."

"This isn't getting us anywhere. Let's say I announce I'm not going up the tower today, and Sonja calls the Jihadis' bluff: what happens then?"

"Nothing. Is business as usual." Valentina pointed. "Except for you."

"But that's too easy. Yeah, I lose face, but I just proved I can create energy out of nothing. I can take the hit." Now there was blood on his mouth where he'd worried his teeth into his skin. He wiped it away with the back of his hand and inspected the smear. "I'm missing something, aren't I?"

"Just a little bit." Tabletop put three mugs of black coffee down on the table, and retrieved one for herself. "You and the Jihadis are calling for the same thing. No one's going to believe you're not connected with them, no matter how much you protest."

"But I don't have anything to do with them. They broke my arm!"

Tabletop shrugged and blew steam from the top of her mug. "So what? When has the truth had anything to do with it? You're alone, with the bomb, and you steal it yourself. Now you're using it as leverage to get Michael out. You can't deny that's what you've wanted all along, because everyone's seen you up on the tower, throwing rubble around."

"But…" he protested.

"What's going to happen next is Sonja is going to come through that door with a squad of goons and hang you by the thumbs until you tell her where the bomb is." She slurped her drink. "You should have told her it was a fake last night because she's not going to believe you

now."

"*Pizdets.* Utter *pizdets.* They've not only taken me out, they've made sure that Michael stays buried forever. And we're not a single step closer to working out who the *huy* they are." He picked up his mug and threw it against the wall.

It shattered, and brown liquid spattered across the magnolia paint, clinging for a second before starting to drip.

Petrovitch stared at the dark pattern, as if it could give some meaning.

"We have to get out of here before they come for us, Sam."

He tore his attention away from the coffee stain. "No. I'll go on my own. You all have cast-iron alibis, and they don't want you anyway. It's me, and the more distance I put between us, the better."

Lucy appeared at her door, scratching at her head. "What's going on?"

"Tell her, because I don't have time." Petrovitch's gaze strayed to the closed bedroom door, and he bared his teeth. "Watch the front doors, will you? If there's any movement, call me."

He marched in, shoving the door hard and banging it back against the wall. "Maddy? I'm out of here as soon as I can get my stuff together, and you have to be awake right now because I'm going to ask you a question once and I need you to answer it straightaway."

She stirred. "Sam?"

"Tell me you're listening." He groveled on the floor for his battery chargers.

She sat up, holding the duvet across her breasts. "Sam? What's the matter?"

"The matter," he said, throwing the chargers unerringly onto the desk, "is that my life is being mined for tiny details which are then used to trap me like a *yebani* rat. I have just watched a video starring a man who only I would recognize, put on the big screen entirely for my benefit."

"Sam, you're making no sense."

While he was down at floor level, he swept up his clothes from where they'd fallen last night. "If only. Are you ready for the question?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The question is this: who have you been talking to?"

She blinked. "What?"

"It's not me. So it must be you. You're the only one who knows about the Prophet of the New Machine Jihad: not Tina, not Tabletop, not Lucy, not Sonja, and Harry Chain is very, very dead. Yet there is a picture of that man stuck to the wall in the next room, and I want to know how the *huy* he got there!" Petrovitch snatched up his courier

bag and started jamming things into its depths. “I told you everything. Absolutely everything. You know my deepest, darkest secrets, and someone is using them to destroy me.”

Madeleine colored up. “I have not told anyone, anything.”

“I don’t believe you.” Petrovitch gathered everything up in his arms. Still wearing the dressing gown, he paused at the door. “And I’ve just worked out who it is.”

She threw the duvet aside and advanced on him, naked, magnificent, furious. Any other time, he would have felt desire rise like a burning white heat. Not now: he was too far gone for that.

“I have not betrayed you,” she said.

“No. But your priest has.”

“That’s impossible,” she roared.

“Every week. Without fail. You went to Father John and confessed your sins. Every week we were together. And every week that we weren’t. I opened my life to you, and you spilled your guts to him.” He turned away, and couldn’t help but turn back. “Except I never told you about Michael until afterward. How *yebani* brilliant am I?”

All the fight was knocked out of her. “He wouldn’t do such a thing.”

“When I find him, I’m going to kill him. Eventually.” This time he did leave. He spun on his heel and started toward the landing.

Valentina, Tabletop and Lucy fell in behind him.

“I thought I told you I want to be on my own.”

“You won’t get far looking like that,” said Tabletop. “Probably better that we come with you.”

Lucy darted ahead for the door, and checked the corridor for Oshicora guards. “Clear.”

“Yeah, like this isn’t going to end badly.”

He hesitated as he crossed the threshold, but Valentina put her hand between his shoulder blades and shoved him out.

“We go now, or not at all.”

13

Petrovitch dressed—was dressed—in the back of Valentina's car. It might have been funny; all the awkwardness, the fumbling, the myriad opportunities for an inappropriate hand to fleetingly rest. But he wasn't in the mood, and his black cloud was contagious.

They hid up a side street, squeezed in between two town houses, in amongst the pristine refuse bins waiting for their new owners. Valentina had the window open a crack, and at one point she heard a convoy of cars.

"So it begins," she said. She glanced into the rearview mirror, eyes wide in the gray morning light.

"Sonja hasn't got the manpower to search for us." Petrovitch was between Tabletop and Lucy, twisting and straining to adjust his clothing into something that might become comfortable. "She'll set up static checkpoints using her own employees, and attempt to resurrect what's left of the CCTV system."

"Evasion is not our problem. Becoming outlaws is."

"Yeah, well. We've all been there before."

"So." She turned in her seat now that he had at last become still. "What do we do?"

"I take it you heard me and Maddy?"

"Hmm. It was difficult not to."

"The priest is the link between the Jihad and me. We need to find him."

"Is big city. Which church would he call home?"

Petrovitch shut his eyes. "It's somewhere in Belgravia, not far. He won't be there, though."

"No?"

"No. Would you be if you thought Maddy was going to kick your door down?"

"If I wanted to pretend that everything is normal, perhaps." But she conceded the point.

Tabletop drew a pattern in the condensation on the window. "Sam? You sure about this Father John? What if you're wrong?"

"If I'm wrong, I'll still put a bullet through his head." He reached into his pocket for his gun. "If I'm right, he'll be grateful when I do."

"Don't like him much, do you?" said Lucy.

"No. No, I don't. Can't say I ever did."

"Maybe when you find him, you'll change your mind about killing him."

"Then again," and he flicked the safety off and on again. "Why

don't we make a start?"

Valentina started the engine, and listened to its tone. "So?"

"Mount Street," said Petrovitch. "I want to find out how far this has gone."

"What is there?" She tapped her satnav.

"A Jesuit mission. It's where the Inquisition's staying."

"I thought you were never going to talk to them," said Lucy.

"This isn't about Michael. This is about me."

"Just thinking ahead," said Tabletop, still drawing on the window with the tip of her fingernail. The pattern in the moisture had grown in size and complexity. "If Oshicora comes looking for you there, how do you intend to escape? It's not like going over the rooftops is an option anymore."

He looked down at his arm and snarled at it. "Should have… *pizdets*. I'll get a drone in the air. It'll give us a couple of minutes' warning if nothing else."

"You have to start thinking, Sam, because you're going to get caught otherwise."

"Okay, okay. Look: I'll try and find a couple of cars to block the ends of the street. Sonja's private army drive cars with a manual override, so I won't be able to stop them, but I can take a moment to put a trace on their transmitters. That'll tell me where they are. Also, her lot are info-rich, so I should be able to track them if they come in on foot. I can blind and deafen them so that no orders can get in or out if I need to. I can get virtual agents to monitor the digital traffic, too, and look out for key words." He scratched the bridge of his nose. "Better?"

"Yes." Tabletop sat back and stared at what she'd drawn. "I have no idea what that is."

"It's a Shaker tree-of-life. If you want I can show you the picture you've taken it from." Petrovitch leaned back in his seat. "Come on, Tina. Let's go."

She pulled out into Curzon Street and took an immediate left to take her off the main road. "There is a back entrance. We should use it."

"Can you really show me this?" Tabletop was watching the buildings pass behind her window.

"Sure." He hacked her stealth suit and flipped her an image of a colored print that hung in thousands of American homes.

Tabletop looked intently at the screen on the inside of her wrist. "I don't remember it. Why can't I remember it?"

"Because they scrubbed your mind with your consent? Maybe the patterns are still there, you just can't access them. Like you've still got the data but the filenames have gone."

“How do I get them back?”

“I don’t think you can. I think they’re lost forever.” Petrovitch grimaced. “Sorry. Bedside manner’s a bit abrupt.”

She sighed and wiped the image away, both on her suit and on the window. “I hate this. But I hate them more.”

Valentina threw the car around another corner and stamped on the brakes. She looked out and up at a honey-colored stone end-wall that butted up exactly with the later buildings on either side. The rose window was missing a few panes of glass, but the rest of it looked solid. “This is it.”

“Not quite.” Petrovitch pointed to the dark wooden doors recessed in an alcove to the right of the church. A security camera pointed down at the pavement outside. “That’s it.”

“How long will you be?”

“Minutes. I’ve tried waking some cars up, but it’s been a year since they were started. They all need new batteries, much like me.” He leaned over Tabletop and popped the door. “Wait for me, say, there.”

Opposite the church was the entrance to an underground car park. The shuttered doors were locked, but the building still overhung enough to hide them.

“Should I come?” asked Lucy.

“No one’s coming. And this time, you’re not going to argue.” He climbed across Tabletop and jumped down into the road. “Bag.”

They passed it out and he threw it around his neck and over his shoulder. Part of the strap caught on his metalwork. That it took moments to free it wasn’t the point; that he had to do it at all made him grind his teeth.

Then he looked up at the three faces staring out at him. “Why the *chyort* do you put up with me?” He looked left and right, even though he knew nothing was coming, and that the Oshicora guards were still back at the hotel. Someone was watching.

The camera above the Jesuits’ door was aimed directly at him. By the time he walked across the street, the heavy oak door was ajar. He put his hand on it and hesitated briefly, glancing up in time to see the camera’s lens wink and whirr.

If they’d been waiting for him, he was in danger of becoming predictable.

“Five minutes and I’m out of here,” he said, and shoved the door aside.

Sister Marie caught the swinging door and stopped it from crashing into the plasterwork. “Welcome,” she said. “No Madeleine?”

“Not this time. Maybe not ever.” His face twitched. “Where is he?”

“The cardinal? Down here, on the left,” she started, but Petrovitch was already stalking down the narrow white-washed corridor, checking each door in turn before shouldering one open.

“Doctor Petrovitch,” said the man behind the desk. Two words, and already his midwestern accent had got his guest’s back up.

Petrovitch kicked at the chair facing the desk and fell into it. “His Excellency Cardinal James Matthew Carillo, Society of Jesus, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Now we’ve got the pleasantries out of the way, where the fuck is that lying priest you’ve been milking for information about Michael. I’d like a word with him.”

The cardinal tugged at the sleeves of his black cassock and reached across the desk to where a silver teapot sat steaming on a tray. “Shall I pour?”

“Stop stalling.” He reached into his bag, and he felt, rather than heard, Sister Marie stiffen. He pulled out the bottle of vodka and slammed it down on the polished wood. “I’m quite happy to turn the whole of the Freezone upside down looking for him, but I’m kind of assuming you know exactly where he is and would very much like to save me the trouble.”

Carillo passed Petrovitch an empty porcelain cup before taking one for himself. Petrovitch unscrewed the bottle and splashed some in the bottom of each.

“*Chtob vse byli zdorovy.*” The cardinal raised his teacup and drained the contents. Petrovitch followed suit, then launched the fragile china at the empty fireplace.

“Force of habit. Are you going to tell me where this Father John is, or am I going to have to break something else?”

“It may not surprise you to learn that I’ve been around the block once or twice myself, Doctor Petrovitch.” Carillo cleared his throat noisily. Whichever block he’d lived on, it hadn’t involved knocking back neat spirits at six in the morning. “Or can I call you Sam?”

“No, let’s keep this professional. The priest: where is he?”

“Surprisingly enough, we don’t put electronic tags on the clergy. That’s a Protestant thing.”

Petrovitch turned his head. “Sister? Could you hold this for a moment?” He dipped into his bag for his automatic, remembering to hold it by the barrel as he brought it out.

The nun took the gun. “Because?”

“Because otherwise the temptation to shoot this obstructive wanker in the face will prove too much, and I don’t want to be in a position where you and me end up in a firefight. Now,” and he twisted back, “where is he?”

The cardinal steepled his fingers. “You seem very anxious to find

him, and not in a partake-of-one-of-the-sacraments sort of way. Are you intending to visit violence upon his person?"

Petrovitch leaned forward and stretched out his left arm. "It may not be very grown up of me, but he started it." He used the same arm to sweep the desk of everything on it. The teapot, tray, jug, sugar, bottle, papers, lamp, statuette of Ignatius Loyola: all ended up jumbled, shattered or dented, and the small book-lined room now smelled like a distillery.

He heard the sound of a gun slide being pulled behind his ear, and he ignored it. He leaned back and laid his arm in his lap.

Carillo wiped a fleck of milk from the back of his hand. "I'll take that as a yes. We have our own procedures to deal with any specific allegations you'd like to make against a particular priest. We're quite rigorous when we investigate, but I'm sure you appreciate that just giving you Father Slater's address isn't an option here."

"And I'm sure you appreciate that, what do you call it, breaking the seal of the confessional means that our beloved John Slater is going to get his bollocks ripped off by the Pope himself." Petrovitch let that sink in, then brushed away the gun barrel that was tickling the side of his neck. "All the information you've got about Michael is from my wife, via that little wooden box in his church."

"That's," and Carillo paused, "a very serious accusation to make, Doctor Petrovitch."

"If that was all the arsehole had done, I'd go round and just give him a good slapping. He's in league with the New Machine Jihad—who suddenly think they're nuclear-capable. We're in Armageddonist territory here, Your fucking Excellency, and if I don't have some answers soon, it's going to be too shitting late to do anything about it." He took a deep breath. "I'm not used to swearing in English, but I'm making the effort because you're a Yank, and it's important that you understand just how trouser-pissingly scary this all is."

"There's a bomb? In the Metrozone?"

Petrovitch didn't bother to correct him about either the nature of the weapon or its location. "In about ten minutes, maybe less, the Freezone is going to declare a city-wide state of emergency. Sonja Oshicora thinks I took the bomb, and she won't balk at sticking red-hot pokers up my arse if she thinks I can tell her where it is. My problem is that only someone who knows my life inside out could make her believe that. Two people have access to that level of detail. One is my wife, the other is her confessor."

The cardinal would have made an adept poker player. His face betrayed almost no emotion at all. "How can I contact you?"

"You don't. I'll give you a couple of hours and I'll call you." Petrovitch stood up. "We understand each other here, right?"

“I am aware of what is at stake, Doctor Petrovitch.” Carillo extended his hand warily. “Thank you for your candor.”

“Yeah. Is that what they call it now?” He met the cardinal’s gesture. “I’d call it being a foul-mouthed, bad-tempered little shit, and sooner or later I’m going to have to do something about that.”

“But not now.”

“I’m just a little busy here.” Petrovitch retrieved his gun from Sister Marie and put it back in his bag. He looked at the pile of broken china and sodden paper. “Sorry about your stuff. I hope none of it was valuable.”

“Do not store up treasures for yourselves on earth, where moth and woodworm destroy them and thieves can break in and steal.” Carillo made a dismissive wave. “Only things.”

“*Zatknis’ na hui,* you pious *perdoon stary*. Go and talk to who you have to.” Petrovitch glanced at the clock in the corner of his vision. “Time I disappeared.”

“Sister Marie will show you out.” The cardinal was already tugging at the landline phone’s cable, pulling it out from the mess on the floor.

They swept back down the corridor, and Petrovitch called ahead to Valentina.

“Everything you said,” asked the nun of his back. “Was it true?”

“If I lied to him, I’m going to lie to you.” He put his hand on the door to the outside. “Why don’t you find a news feed? It might help you decide.”

“Good luck,” she said. “God speed.”

“You know I don’t believe any of that *govno,* don’t you? Fate is what you make it.” He could hear Valentina’s car right outside.

“It won’t stop me from praying for you, Samuil Petrovitch. I think you need all the help you can get.”

14

They sat around a flickering screen, watching Sonja's broadcast. None of them felt the need to speak during it—it was self-explanatory. When she'd finished, she took a moment to stare into the camera and straight into Petrovitch's soul, trying to communicate just how very disappointed she was with him.

Petrovitch turned off the video feed and unplugged the lead from the screen to the computer strapped to his body. He threw the loose end snaking across the floor and looked sour.

Lucy got up from her fold-down chair and switched the white noise off, then just stood there like a little girl lost.

"What happens now?"

"I'm going to try and find a kitchen. Come on." Tabletop stood at the door to the waiting area and scanned the overhead signs to see if there might be a clue. Obstetrics, Oncology, Medical Imaging, yes—all the equipment was ready and waiting for doctors and patients—but a strong cup of morning coffee still eluded her.

Petrovitch was left with Valentina.

"You must tell Sonja," she said. "Even if she does not believe you, she will doubt herself."

"Tabletop was right. I should have said something earlier." He cupped his face with his hands and dragged them down his cheeks. "I've made it even more of a *pizdets* than it should be."

"You were not to know."

"I'm supposed to know everything."

She moved along the row of seats, still covered in plastic wrapping from the supplier. She sat next to him and drew her legs underneath her.

"You are not God."

"Not yet. I will be one day, if I live that long. I've seen it. I've seen a hundred years ahead, but I can't tell Lucy what happens next."

If she thought his hubris worthy of comment, she chose not to. "Call Sonja. Explain to her you have nothing to do with New Machine Jihad. That you are both victims. She will listen to you."

"Yeah, I know she will. But this will be the first time that it won't make a difference. We're running out of options here. Whoever's done this has got it nailed down tight."

"Hmm," she said. "No plan is perfect. We must look for weak link. Exploit it. Where would that be?"

Petrovitch closed his eyes. "I'm tired, Tina. Too tired to think. Didn't get much sleep last night."

"I heard."

She might have been embarrassed, but he wasn't. He blew out a stream of air. "I thought… it was all going to be okay, at last. Now look at us."

Valentina clicked her tongue. "Of course, if priest is involved, you and Madeleine apart is part of scheme, *da*?"

Petrovitch blinked. "*Chyort.*"

"So you call Sonja now. Then we get to work." She patted him on the shoulder and went to find the others.

On his own, in the semi-dark, plugged into the wall to recharge his battery packs, Petrovitch made the connection carefully. No casual throwing of a message across an unguarded network this time; he obscured his routing, and ensured it was impossible to trace him. It would have been easier with the rat, but he could still work his magic.

She wasn't alone, and it took her a few moments to spot the window opening on her screen. He activated his usual avatar to stand in his place: it would look like him, mirror his movements and his expressions, but it would be manifestly not him, and he'd set himself against a shifting background of images that almost chose themselves.

Sonja was leaning over the desk, shouting at someone in Japanese, with English words rising from the stream like rocks. Petrovitch could have run her conversation through a translator, but the gist of it was clear enough.

Not only had her personal security detail failed to collect him, they'd missed everybody. Two of them were in hospital, as a result of an unfortunate encounter with Madeleine's fists and feet.

"Hey," said Petrovitch, "down here."

She did a double-take. His image held up his hand in greeting.

Sonja looked over the top of her screen at the current object of her ire and dismissed him with a bark of barely concealed disdain.

"The hired help not up to much, then?" he said. "That's where surrounding yourself with friends who'll keep you on the right path really pays off."

"Sam. What have you done?" She sat down.

"Not what you think."

Sonja leaned forward and opened a drawer. Its contents were hidden from him, but it didn't take a genius to work out what she was attempting to do.

"Did you do it?" she asked plainly.

"No. No, I didn't." He could see the muscles in her forearm flex as she felt across a tiny keyboard for the next letter. "Look: I need your full attention for a bit, which I won't have if you're trying to instruct your minions to track down my physical location. They'll never find it, and it'll just mean you have to shout some more. So give it up and talk

to me."

She reluctantly put both her hands on the desk. "I'll find you."

"Maybe you will. But not before I'm ready. So let's talk."

"There's only one thing we really need to discuss: where's the bomb, Sam?"

"There is no bomb, Sonja. It's no more than a stage prop."

"You said it was a bomb."

"I was wrong."

"You? Wrong? I thought you were never wrong."

In real life, Petrovitch put his head back and stared blindly at the ceiling. "In my defense, I wasn't the only one taken in. But when I got out of the hospital, I went back to Container Zero for another look. Someone had been in that container long before the wrecking crew broke into it, and arranged everything like they were dressing a shop window."

"What… I told Iguro that no one was allowed near it."

"Yeah. He said. I ignored him. Good job, too. Sonja, they—whoever they are—were waiting for me. They had to get the bomb after I'd seen it, but before I could check its authenticity. Madeleine was on her way back with a geiger-counter when they broke my arm, stole my rat and carried the bomb away. Ten more minutes, and I would have been able to prove there was as much fissile material in that cylinder as there is in one of my farts."

She bit her lower lip. Her teeth were impossibly white.

"I wish, I wish I could believe you. I have a credible threat against the Freezone made by a known organization who claim to have a nuclear weapon. What am I supposed to do?"

"Call their bluff. Tell the so-called New Machine Jihad to take their bomb and stick it up their collective *zhopu*. Let the world know that it's business as usual, and you'll be ready to hand over to the Metrozone on time. That's what you're supposed to do."

"I can't take the risk, Sam. Everyone thinks that the Jihad are a front for you. Why don't you come in? We can sort this out." She grabbed a tissue and pressed it into the corner of her eye. "If you've done nothing, we can prove that together."

"Nice offer, Sonja. But that's exactly what they want to happen. They've designed this so that handing myself in is the next logical step, except that I'm not going to play by their rules anymore."

"Do you know how mad you sound? Listen to yourself!"

"Sonja—I lived through Armageddon. Do you realize how much I despise them? They ruined my life. I was born with a malformed heart because of radiation. I lost my father to cancer. I grew up in a city that was a social and economic basketcase because of what the Armageddonists did to Europe. And now I'm supposed to be running

around with my own bomb threatening to set it off because the UN won't let Michael out to play? You're out of your *yebani* mind if you think I've got something to do with this!"

"You and the Jihadis want the same thing. You've run out of time to influence the UN, so now you're trying this. It won't work."

"Of course it won't work. I'm going public after I've talked to you and I'll tell everyone who wants to hear that there is no bomb in the Freezone. Why would I do that if I wanted to coerce the international community into doing what I want?"

Sonja sat back with a thump. "You might be smarter than me, Sam, but you can't just talk your way out of this."

"I'm smarter than all but half a dozen people on the planet. That has no bearing on whether I'm telling the truth or not. You've jeopardized the whole concept of the Freezone by falling for this scam. Don't compound the error by doing their work for them, whoever the *huy* they are." His avatar folded his arms, something that the real-life Petrovitch just couldn't do anymore.

"The Freezone is finished if I don't arrest you. Everyone knows we're close, and I can't be seen to allow personal feelings to get in the way of doing what's right." She clutched at her tissue. "Make it easy for me, Sam. Tell me where you are."

"You should be concentrating on the Jihad. I know I will be, and if you're not going to dig them out from whichever stone they've crawled under, I'll do it for you. Just stay out of my way if you're not going to help." He was all but finished. "And leave Madeleine out of this. You've done enough already."

"She's wanted. Along with everyone with you." Sonja regained a measure of calm. She straightened her jacket and dabbed at the end of her nose. "I will have what I want in the end."

"Yeah, good luck with that. So, are we leaving it like this?"

"Looks that way. Sam, I'm sorry."

"Not as sorry as you'll end up being. I'll give you the bomb, and the Jihad, and whoever put them up to this. You'll end up looking like a *mudak,* and I'll be the *yebani* hero. Again." He gave her one last wave. "*Sayonara.*"

Petrovitch opened his eyes, and took the coffee proffered to him by Lucy.

"That went well," he said.

"Did it?"

"No, not really." He bent his face low over the mug and breathed deeply. "Geopolitics seems to trump friendship every single time there's a clash. Apparently, even fifteen-year-old girls are now enemies of the state."

Lucy shivered. "Will we be all right?"

“Have I ever let you down?”

“No. I’d rather not have to stab or shoot anyone, though. Or have them stab or shoot me.”

Petrovitch looked down at his arm again. “We’re dealing with people who are comfortable with nuclear terrorism. Stabby, shooty stuff might be the least of our worries.”

She sat down next to him, in the seat recently vacated by Valentina. “Are you sure about the bomb? Not being a real bomb, I mean.”

“There is a scenario I might not have considered.” He pursed his lips, then smiled when he saw her expression change. “Still a fake bomb. But what if the Jihad don’t know that? What if they’ve been set up just like we have? You see, I know the prophet—when I say know, I mean he tried to kill me once—and despite him being a weapons-grade certifiable *ebanashka,* he’s not a liar. He wouldn’t be involved in this if he knew there was no bomb.”

“Who’s done this to us? Who’s gone to so much trouble when… you know?” Lucy leaned in and tried to rest her head on his shoulder. She ended up getting an earful of metal strut, and shifted uncomfortably.

“Yeah. They could have killed us in half a dozen different ways, and hey, some have tried. Madeleine’s always been on top of any assassination attempt, no matter how ill-formed or ill-thought out. Yet she seems to have missed this completely.” Petrovitch swigged at his coffee, made on a machine which still had the traces of the manufacturer’s oil in its pipework. “Don’t sweat it. Just because they’re good doesn’t mean we’re not better.”

They sat for a while, him swirling the gritty dregs of his coffee in tight circles at the bottom of his mug, she curled up in the seat next to him, knees drawn up in her arms and her chin resting on her knees: a young girl’s posture.

“You still got that gun Tina gave you?” he asked.

Lucy nodded.

“She show you how to shoot straight?”

She shook her head.

“We can’t fire off live rounds in here in case someone overhears. But we can go through the basics. Give it here.”

She reached into her pocket and held out the automatic.

“Okay. First lesson.” He reached over with his right hand and turned the barrel away from his face. “Never point it at anyone you’re not prepared to shoot. Never shoot anyone you’re not prepared to kill.”

She looked at the gun, and placed it butt first in his hand.

“Good girl.”

He showed her how to make the gun safe, to eject a round still in the chamber, how to unload, and reload. He got her to stand and assume a two-handed grip, leaning forward against the inevitable recoil. He checked her dominant eye, and told her that she may as well throw the *yebani* thing at her attacker if she was going to shake as much as that. He also said that if he ever caught her holding the gun sideways, gangster-style, he'd tear up her adoption certificate.

After she'd done everything often enough that he was confident she wouldn't put a round through her own foot, he asked her if she was ready.

"Ready? For what?"

Petrovitch started to unplug his battery packs from their chargers. "I've found the original upload of the New Machine Jihad video. The copy on ENN was clean, but the one on the Ukrainian server still has all its exif metadata attached."

She flicked the safety on the gun with studied care. "The…"

"It's a bit on the front of the file you don't get to see, but it tells you when the file was made, what the original resolution was, the camera model. Stuff like that. On GPS-enabled capture devices, it even records where it was taken, so you don't have the arguments where you swear blind it was Beijing and your girlfriend says it was Shanghai."

"Okay." Lucy pocketed her automatic and waited for the payoff.

"Come on. You're smarter than that."

She screwed her eyes up and muttered. "GPS, GPS, GPS." Then they opened wide. "You know where the Jihad are."

"Were. Chances are they're still there, but they might have shifted." Petrovitch had gathered up all his wires and closed the flap on his bag on them.

She was suddenly agitated, eager to go and do something: activity against idleness. "You should have said as soon as you knew! Why did you waste… oh."

"I don't want to get you killed. But leaving you behind isn't going to work, either." He looked around the waiting room. Apart from the used mug and the crinkled plastic where they'd sat, it was just as they'd found it.

15

Valentina drove them toward Cricklewood, aiming at the coordinates that Petrovitch had supplied.

"We have plan, *da?*"

He equivocated, then finally admitted the truth. "Not really. A lot of it depends on whether the Jihad thinks we're on the same side as each other. I didn't exactly leave the prophet on good terms."

"He tried to kill Sam," said Lucy from the back seat.

"It was a misunderstanding. I'm sure we can talk it over like civilized men."

"If you can get close enough to him," said Valentina.

"Well, that's not actually necessary." Petrovitch twisted in his seat. Tabletop was playing with Valentina's plastic explosive, making little creatures out of the putty and sticking them on the door. "I know it's stable, but *yobany stos,* woman!"

She smiled and presented him with a shape that could have been either a dog or a horse.

"We might need that later." He stared at the animal before attaching it to the dashboard. "Anyway. Back to the Jihad: the prophet expects the AI to speak to him through his mobile phone. A quick scan of the area tells me that there are a stack of phones active in the cell where the GPS signal came from. I can fake the Jihad better than whoever's faking it already. All I have to do is ring round till I find the right one, and the prophet will be expecting us."

Valentina turned left onto the North Circular. She didn't bother to indicate, just hauled the wheel around and waited for all four tires to regain contact with the tarmac before accelerating away. "So, we just walk up to door and knock?"

"Pretty much."

"And then…"

"It's up to them. You know how good my negotiation skills are."

"Hmm," she said. "And you propose we leave talking to you?"

Petrovitch shrugged apologetically. "I did say I didn't have much of a plan."

The empty road lent itself to speed, and Valentina took full advantage. She only braked to avoid a traffic island and a roundabout. "Is here?"

"Pretty much."

She knew when stealth was required, too. She turned off the engine and they rolled silently down the access road toward a pair of high metal gates.

“It’s a school,” said Lucy.

The gates were half-open. A big white-and-rust van sat sideways across the parking bays outside the main entrance, sitting in a sea of broken glass and shell cases. There were broken windows all up the front of the foyer. Bodies had been bagged and tagged here: spray-painted numbers were fading in the winter sun.

“Not marked for repair, then.”

They came to a halt in the furthest reaches of the car park, well away from the building.

Valentina cranked the handbrake. “Are you sure about this?”

“No surprises. Everything out in the open. There are more of them than us, and we don’t know if they’re armed.” Petrovitch popped the door open and felt the cold air bite at his ankles. “We’ll be fine.”

They walked, four abreast, across the empty space to the entrance.

“First floor. They’re watching us,” said Tabletop, conversationally. “So, these New Machine Jihad people. Crazy?”

“Mad as a bag of spanners. The Jihad is their god, who they believe wants to usher in an age of plenty and ease under its benign all-seeing eye. Less stupid than some belief systems I can think of: this one is at least credible.” He pursed his lips. “If it wasn’t for the fact that their god was insane and I killed it.”

Petrovitch considered holding one of the doors open for the others. In the end, he just stepped through the broken pane and crunched a little way into the darkened foyer.

“Yeah. I’m here,” he called, and waited for someone from the Jihad to turn up. The others joined him. Valentina unslung her AK and cradled it across her body.

Just when his patience was wearing thin and he’d almost ground a piece of glass through the heel of his boot, a figure appeared in the distance, just visible through the small glass window in the double doors.

She—it looked like a she from the way they walked—appeared to be in no hurry. Petrovitch gave a nod in the direction of the doors and Tabletop and Valentina turned their attention to the other exits. Lucy started to reach into her pocket.

“It’s fine. Relax. No one’s shooting at us yet.” Petrovitch gave her what he hoped would be a reassuring smile, but knew it would come out more like a grimace.

The woman stood there, hands holding either side of the doors open. She was dressed in a filthy boilersuit and her hair was gray: her resemblance to an Outie was so close that Valentina’s reaction was predictable and automatic. Petrovitch felt the need to stand between the muzzle of her rifle and their guide.

“You seek an audience with the Prophet of the New Machine Jihad?” she asked.

“Since I’m the first-born herald of the machine age, I’m pretty confident he’ll see me.”

“Then come. All of you.”

She swept before them, leaving them to taste her trail of iron and earth. Down a long corridor—noticeboards either side, between the classrooms, with pupils’ work still framed behind the plastic—to a vast, echoing sports hall lit only by the roof-level sky lights.

The murmuring of the—worshippers? Acolytes?—drifted away as they entered. Petrovitch walked between where they were sat, on the cold hard floor marked with colored lines and black scuffs, picking his way to the front where there was an empty chair.

Not empty: a small black phone, propped up against the back.

Just to make things interesting, Petrovitch made it light up as he approached. He could hear the collective straining as the Jihad’s followers all leaned forward.

But he couldn’t see the bomb. Now that he was looking, he could tell there was other activity in and around the building, the signals being partially obscured by the ferroconcrete walls. The woman who’d met them at the entrance carried on walking, leaving them in a loose, uncomfortable knot by the chair. The couple of hundred Jihadis turned their attention from the phone to the newcomers.

“Say nothing. I wouldn’t even smile.”

“Sam,” said Tabletop.

“That’s…”

“My suit’s comms have gone active,” she said. Her hand was already on her waist, reaching for her gun.

Petrovitch felt in his bag for his own. “*Chyort.* Looks like we’re not the only ones to read the exif data.”

“What’s wrong?” asked Lucy.

“The CIA. Close by. What are they saying?”

“They’ve changed codes. All I know is that, for the first time in eleven months, I’ve got a signal.”

“And if I had Michael, I’d crack those codes, locate the transmitters and get the jump on them.” He looked up again at the high windows, then at the doors in each of the four corners of the hall, checking for the outside wall. “Those two lead outside. Bear that in mind for when we have to run.”

“Behold the turncoat! Look upon the traitor who was the Chosen Son of the new age!”

“Ah, *pizdets.*” Petrovitch’s shoulders slumped. He turned to see the prophet advancing toward him, a tatty curtain serving as a robe. Underneath, the man was quite underdressed: a pair of baggy shorts,

nothing more. “Yeah, look. I had prepared a long speech full of fancy words to convince you of my good intentions and break to you the fact you’ve been duped a little more gently than I’m going to. But that was before our American friends decided to put in an appearance.”

The prophet gave no indication he’d listened to a single word. “You opposed the New Machine Jihad before. Have you come to repent and seek absolution for your heinous crimes?” He shook one of his bony fists in Petrovitch’s direction, and as he walked, revealed that he was leaning on a huge, drop-forged spanner, a full meter long.

“*Zatknis’ na hui,* you *kon’ pedal’nii.* Any second now, the CIA are going to come piling in here to fry your arses, and the only way I can stop them is to show them you haven’t got a real nuclear bomb squirreled away somewhere.”

“The power of the lightning will turn aside the unbelievers’ swords,” said the prophet, his oil mark glistening on his forehead. “It has been foretold.”

“And whoever is at the other end of this phone,” shouted Petrovitch square in the prophet’s face and snatching up the device from the chair, “is no more the New Machine Jihad than the *yebani* Pope is. You’ve been had, all of you. There is no bomb. There is no Jihad. And Michael is not the Jihad come back to life.”

“Sam…”

“Not,” he started to say, and wanted to add “now.” But it was Tabletop speaking and she was drawing her gun. “What?”

“It’s suddenly gone quiet.”

“*Yebani v’rot.*” Petrovitch still had the phone. He said to Lucy, “Catch,” before back-handing the prophet with his left arm.

An arc of bright red blood hung in the air for a moment, before both it and the prophet came splashing down.

“Far door. Go.” There was a string of flesh still attached to a strut, and somewhere deep inside, there was the realization that it wasn’t just the other guy who was hurting.

There was movement. The Jihad were rising as one, but there was more: discs like hockey pucks were skittering across the floor. Black-clad faceless forms crouched coiled in the doorway, poised and ready.

The discs exploded, concussions of noise and light: people fell, staggered, screamed. Not Petrovitch, who timed his blink perfectly, nor Tabletop, who’d been ready for tactics she’d been taught herself. Valentina shielded her eyes almost too late, but Lucy hadn’t been looking, still trying to juggle the thrown phone to safety.

The bangs made her jump all over again. The phone spun and twisted in the air. She stretched out, and folded her fingers around it just as Valentina fell into her. They rolled together in a confused heap, arms and legs at all angles. At the end of one hand, a small black

mobile phone.

The first shots brought down those closest to the door. Petrovitch tagged each gun, ran the sound through an analyzer to tell him what they were using, and counted the bullets. There was no way he could return fire: even if he didn't care about hitting the Jihad's disciples, he didn't have line-of-sight anymore.

Neither did Tabletop, though she'd zoned completely. Her training had kicked in at a subconscious level and she was hunting her former colleagues, stalking forward into the mêlée of people, crouched and hidden.

Petrovitch saw Valentina sprawling. He levered her up, she snatching her kalash as she rose, then he reached down for Lucy. He pointed to the outside door, and it was all he had to do. She ran, head up, looking where she was going. She was light on her feet and ruthless with her elbows.

The agents at the door fanned out, firing relentlessly to thin the crowd. While part of Petrovitch's mind was counting, another part realized that the CIA didn't know they were there. They'd come for the bomb. The massacre was just what needed to happen first before they secured the area.

Tabletop shot the first one from point-blank range, apparating in front of him. She knew him. Intimately. She didn't spare him. She took careful aim at the middle of his face, where he had no armor and no chance. She spun away after pulling the trigger, stepping forward into the empty space already littered with bodies.

It took a moment for the second agent in line to realize the ghost to her right didn't look quite the same as before. She turned her head, and her gun arm followed.

Before she could complete the move, she was hit. Petrovitch took the momentary opportunity of a clean shot between two reeling Jihadis, threading a bullet between moving chest and back and burying it in her temple. Tabletop stopped her own action and retargeted on the third.

The last agent had just shot a man trying to drag an injured friend away. Brave, but it got him killed, and his friend too. There was nothing personal about it. No relish, or malice. But he was too distracted to see Valentina crouched over her AK when the previous body fell away.

The burst of fire took his legs. The ballistic mesh held, but the impact pulped his bones. He landed face first and, rather than helping him, the needles that stabbed out of their pouches and into his skin to release life-sustaining chemicals made him feel flayed.

Petrovitch trod on his hand and kicked the gun away. Tabletop put her foot in the small of his back and aimed for the nape of his

neck.

"I thought," said Petrovitch over the top of him, "there were only supposed to be one or two left of your cell."

"One. And the field controller who I never met."

"So how did we end up with three?"

"Langley must have inserted more agents."

"*Vsyo govno, krome mochee.*" Petrovitch got down on his hands and knees to look the agent in the eye. "Hey, Yankee. Surprised to see us? Your foot seems to be on backward, by the way. Must smart a bit."

The man concentrated on breathing.

"A message for your president: I'm going to bury him for this, and everything else he's done. *Vrubratsa?*" He patted the man's head. "Okay, we're done." He scrambled up and started for the open door. "Lucy's waiting for us outside. We need to find the bomb, or someone who'll tell us where it is."

"You're going to leave him here?" Tabletop adjusted the grip on her pistol.

"Unless you've the stomach for shooting a defenseless cripple in the back, yeah. I kind of hoped you'd grown out of that, but if you want to, he's all yours. Don't take all day about it though, because I've called for paramedics."

Petrovitch quickly collected the fallen agents' guns, and put them in his bag, while Tabletop decided whether to execute the man she was standing over. Valentina offered her no help to make a decision one way or the other. She simply slung her rifle over her shoulder and jogged toward the doors that led outside.

"Yes, no?" called Petrovitch. He was by the prone prophet, wondering if there was any chance of him waking up this side of Paschal.

Valentina leaned back into the hall, panting. "Van. Bomb. In van. Van going."

"*Chyort.* Tabletop?"

She let out a cry of anger, disgust, self-loathing and hatred that carried on long after the echo had died away. She didn't shoot, though. She didn't even look back.

And Petrovitch was briefly and unreasonably proud of her.

16

Valentina already had the car halfway toward them when they got outside. Lucy was in the passenger seat, still holding the phone in front of her in a two-handed grip.

The wheels smoked as they locked and slid sideways, and the car came to rest right in front of Petrovitch. Tabletop was in and across the back seat seemingly before the door was open, leaving Petrovitch to clamber in.

His feet had just about left the ground when Valentina stamped on the accelerator. Tabletop grabbed him and stopped him from falling out, and the door swung shut on its own.

The van had gone, although there was a drifting cloud of blue diesel by the gates. The remnants of the Jihad were still running, even though the shooting had stopped. Some seemed to be going in circles, while others ran straight up to the high fence that surrounded the school grounds, heedless of the razorwire they would encounter once they were at the top. Others had gone for the gate, and they were in the way.

Valentina swerved left, right, further right, then hard left again, all the time leaning on the horn. She managed not to hit a single person until they reached the choke point of the exit.

She braked hard, throwing everyone forward—except Lucy, who'd managed her seat belt—and the windshield was obscured by a back. The glass creaked, but the car was going slow enough that it didn't give. So Valentina kept on going, not being able to see until she hauled the steering wheel hard right and the body spilled off.

"Tina."

"What?"

Petrovitch looked out the back window at the still rolling form, then deliberately turned away. "I know, I know. Someone is going to pay for this."

"Where is van?" Valentina was going south, as fast as she could.

"Yeah. Hang on." He interrogated the phone network and found a moving cluster of signals on the road parallel to them. He called up a map. "They're on Hendon Way, heading toward the center. We can get in front of them. Right here, then left onto the A5."

When he panned out to get a bigger picture, he saw that Oshicora communications were making a hotspot that was coming north. He drew vectors and didn't like what he saw.

Everyone was moving quicker than the van. He'd get to it around about Swiss Cottage. But Oshicora security were going to run into it

almost at the same time. The van was old, and he couldn't hijack it. Neither could he stop the *nikkeijin*'s cars. It was as if the outcome was already inevitable.

"If you can go faster without killing us, then do it."

He hacked the Oshicora comms, and listened in briefly: long enough for it to become clear they knew where they were heading. Everything was wrong.

"Okay, listen up. As it stands, we're on a collision course with Sonja's corps, who seem to know exactly where the van is and where it's going. I don't like that. It goes beyond educated guesswork and smacks of some secret knowledge that makes me very uncomfortable."

Tabletop counted the bullets left in her magazine. "You think she's in on this?"

"She certainly knows more than she's telling me. Lucy, pass me the Jihad phone."

She didn't respond straightaway, and Petrovitch had to lean over and take it himself.

"That man," said Lucy, "we just…"

"Yeah. No one's saying it doesn't suck, or that we shouldn't have stopped for him, or we shouldn't have run him over in the first place. Or that a little piece of us doesn't die every time we commit yet another atrocity. I'm not even going to suggest that what we're doing is more important than some bat-shit crazy Jihadi's life." He pressed buttons and accessed the phone's call history. "We're all going to do stuff today that isn't likely to be pretty, noble or generous. But I'd rather have you all alive come nightfall, if that's all right."

He turned his full attention to the phone, running the numbers through a search program: he'd called it last, and the number before it was different to the number before that. And so on. Each one was a random, throwaway account, like he used. He was going to get nothing from it.

He looked at the map in his head. They were scant minutes away from intercepting the van, but so were Oshicora security. His eye twitched, then his thumb stabbed down on the power button. The phone winked off, and there was an immediate response from the comms he was monitoring.

"Proof enough that something's going on: they had tabs on the prophet." Petrovitch threw it on the seat between him and Tabletop. "Time to hit the kill switch."

Which he did. If he'd had more time, more processing power—if he'd had Michael on his side—he would have faked the entire Oshicora operation and sent them haring off after some virtual contact heading out toward the East End. He could have made it look like nothing was wrong for either the controllers or the foot-soldiers.

Instead, he was forced to use the blunt instrument of crashing the whole network: just a couple of lines of code inserted in the right place, and hidden programs got to work. Within seconds, everything was offline and locked tight.

It blinded him, too. He was now a small island of electronic consciousness in a sea of dead pixels. He really missed his rat now.

Valentina's satnav had crashed, but he had no way of guiding them to their target anyway, save what he could remember. Petrovitch just hoped that he'd sowed enough confusion to give them the time they needed.

"Left into Belsize Road."

They were driving past what was left of the Paradise Housing Project. The blocks had been demolished, the ground stripped clean, and something new was rising up, a vast, self-contained town of its own, half-finished and ragged.

"Close?" asked Valentina.

"I don't know. Not anymore."

She took the most direct route across the roundabout: the wrong way, and stayed on the right side of the road as she exited. The car rocked first one way, then the other, and somehow stayed upright.

"*Yobany stos.*" Petrovitch braced himself against the door and the roof.

"How are we going to stop the van?" Tabletop slapped her magazine back in. "Do we aim for the tires or the driver?"

"If it comes to it, we're going to ram them. Right?"

"*Da.*" Valentina braked hard, pulled the wheel left and accelerated out of the corner. An alpine-style bar appeared, sandwiched between two roads and facing another: she stopped the car at the junction, the squeal of rubber making the air taste foul.

Tabletop and Petrovitch bundled out. The Freezone was never quiet. There was always building going on, demolition work and pile-driving audible from one side of the city to the other. No one was at work today, and the wind whipped around the high buildings on either side of them, whistling and buffeting as it stirred the street furniture.

It carried on it the sound of a laboring engine.

"Lucy, out now." Petrovitch opened her door and leaned across her to unplug her seat belt.

"Okay, okay. I can do it myself." She batted his hand away, and stepped shivering onto the tarmac.

He reached back in for Valentina's Kalashnikov. "If we screw up, you know what to do?"

Valentina nodded, looked pointedly at the bend in the road ahead. The echoing of grinding gears bounced toward them.

“I won’t miss,” he assured her, then strode out into the road. “Tabletop? Watch my back.”

He lifted the rifle’s butt to his shoulder and took careful aim. Crosshairs that weren’t on the gun appeared in his vision, and he let the barrel swing around. He took a practice shot—checking for accuracy, windage, range—and shattered the top lens on a distant traffic light.

He glanced around at Lucy. “When I stop the van, the people in it are going to get cross. I don’t know if they have guns, but if they do, they might start shooting at us. Then I’ll have to kill them.”

“Tell me again why we’re doing this?”

The van growled into view, and he took aim.

“Because we can only redeem ourselves in the eyes of the world by showing them there was no bomb in the first place.” The tires were an impossibly small target face on. He focused on the front grille and pulled the trigger. He fired three rounds, and hot shell cases smoked into the cold air.

A plume of white steam flashed into the air before being dragged apart by the moving van. The cloud turned dark as oil mixed with the water, and the windshield was painted black. The van swerved, left, right, left, and into the metal railings separating the two carriageways. It careened off, shedding its wing mirror and a shower of paint.

The engine died, and the van rolled across the road, losing speed all the time. It had enough momentum to rise up onto the pavement and into a lamp-post. The lamp-post bent, buckled, and gracefully leaned over until it rested across the van’s hood and roof. Oil started to puddle underneath.

Petrovitch gave a satisfied grunt and started forward, keeping the rifle ready.

“If you’re coming,” he said, “now’s as good a time as any.”

He closed the distance, and a Jihadi spilled out of the van on the far side. Just as he was about to shout an order, a voice behind him squeaked. “Hands where I can see them. Now.”

Lucy edged as far as the driver’s door, holding her automatic out in front of her. The driver put her hands up—slowly—as did the man next to her. Lucy reached out and gripped the handle, pulling it toward her.

“Out. On the ground.”

They complied meekly while she grinned with pure nervous energy.

Petrovitch stalked around the back. The first Jihadi had got to the rear doors, and was just opening them up when Petrovitch pressed the barrel of the AK in his ear.

“Step back and lie down.”

“You can’t stop us,” said the Jihadi.

“Pretty certain I don’t have to. You think you’ve got a nuclear bomb in the back of this van, right?”

“We control the lightning.”

“You haven’t really thought this through, have you? Or didn’t you listen to your mother when she told you what a nuclear explosion does to sensitive electronic equipment? What it might do to Michael?”

From down the road, there was gunfire, the long, drawn-out sound of a car skidding and driving through a shop window, shouting and running.

“Out of time.” Petrovitch reversed the rifle against the Jihadi’s head, and kicked him out of the way before he fell. He wrenched one of the back doors open, letting the light flood in.

When the woman—the Outie-looking one from earlier—saw that it wasn’t one of her fellow acolytes, she pressed the switch in her lap.

Despite his absolute conviction that he was right, and that the bomb was a fake, Petrovitch still flinched. Not that it would have deflected the blast wave of superheated gas one iota, but the big metal cylinder still looked very much like the real thing.

Nothing happened, and the Outie looked at the switch. It was a standard light switch, without the plastic paten on the back. She rocked the switch backward and forward in quick succession, and still no fireball.

“Get out of the *yebani* van, you *mudak*.”

And still she clicked away, shaking it in case there was a loose connection, until Petrovitch lunged forward. He reached in, grabbed her arm, and pulled with all his might. He still held the rifle in his right, so he’d used his left.

She flew, this woman who would have blown them all up leaving a crater a hundred meters across and flattening every building between East Finchley and the Thames. She hit the road with her flailing hands and her face, and rolled like a rag doll until she stopped. She had come out with the switch, which lay a little further on, the bare ends of copper wires torn from their terminals coiling and then lying still.

He climbed up and into the van. The bomb sat on a strip of brown carpet on the floor, and he knelt next to it, resting his hand on the casing. He frowned, and peered briefly at the fastenings before deciding he’d still need a tool kit to open it up. Valentina should have what he needed, but first he had to arrange a truce.

Petrovitch jumped down and stepped out from behind the van. Lucy, standing over her captives, risked a moment’s inattention. “Did I do it right?”

“You’re standing a little close, and you’ve clearly watched too

many cop shows. But yeah. You did it right." He looked down. "Let them go. Make sure they leave."

"Sure?"

"They might be little deluded shits who would have happily started another Armageddon, but we don't have the man- or woman-power to hold them, and we've got better things to do. Chase them off." He hoisted his rifle high and let off a volley of rounds, then started to walk in plain sight to where the Oshicora cars had formed a barricade across the street.

Valentina and Tabletop had held off the Oshicora guards long enough. Every time one of them popped up, they made them hide again. As he passed Valentina crouched behind the hood of her own car, he threw the AK to her.

She caught it and gave him a questioning look.

"It'll be fine," he said, and walked on to stand in the no-man's-land between the two sides. He could feel a dozen sights drawing across his body, so he stopped and cupped his right hand to his mouth. He tried to match it with his left, but it wouldn't quite go.

"*Konichiwa,*" he called. "I've got the bomb, so I don't really need a gun anymore. However, if one of you would like to come with me, I'll let you have it after I've shown you something."

There was some muttering, and from behind them, another Oshicora vehicle approached, late to the party. It nosed up to the cordon, and both driver's and passenger's doors opened. Petrovitch recognized the passenger, even without the benefit of the Freezone's database.

"Iguro. Glad you could make it."

"Petrovitch-san. The communications blackout is your work?" He weaved between the parked cars and toward where Petrovitch stood.

"Yeah. Something wasn't quite right, and I thought it safer if everyone could just step back and think about what they were doing." He scraped his fingers through his hair. "It's been a hell of a morning, Iguro, and I don't think it's over yet."

"I must still arrest you. It is my duty."

"About that. What were the charges again? That I was conspiring with the New Machine Jihad to threaten the Freezone Authority with an atomic bomb?"

"Yes," said Iguro, "exactly that." He had loops of plastic wrist restraints in his belt, and he fingered them.

"Despite the fact that I've consistently maintained that there is no bomb and I've just stopped the Jihad from driving whatever-it-is into the center of the city."

Iguro considered matters before concluding: "That is for others to judge. My part is arresting you, and your friends."

“We’ve got a stalemate, then. You can’t call for back-up, and I’ve got the bomb. Why don’t we sort this out like civilized human beings?”

“What do you propose?”

“Well,” said Petrovitch. “The bomb’s in the back of that van. I’d very much like to open it up and find out why a device that was supposedly sealed twenty years ago has a mobile phone signal still coming from it, but I can’t do that with us all shooting at each other. Don’t get me wrong, we can go back to shooting if you want…”

“That would not be desirable, Petrovitch-san.” Iguro pulled at his jacket and looked uncomfortable. “I have already received a reprimand from Miss Sonja for allowing you access to Container Zero. I must not fail her a second time.”

Petrovitch put his arm over Iguro’s shoulders and started to walk him back toward Valentina’s position. “If you still want to arrest me afterward, I promise I’ll come quietly. Deal?”

“I suppose it is fair.” He waved to his men to stand down, and only on passing Valentina did he realize by how many they had outnumbered Petrovitch. He looked sour.

“What?”

“I had expected more of you,” said Iguro. “Where are the Jihad?”

“*Balvan.* If you’d been listening…” Petrovitch shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. Let’s get this *yebanat* open, then maybe things will become clearer.”

17

Valentina set her tool box down and cracked the two halves apart, revealing layers of trays and little drawers. She leaned over the sealed cover of the bomb and inspected the retaining bolts, her hand running along a line of hex wrenches until she found the one she thought would fit.

Petrovitch rested his hand on silvery cylinder. It felt cool and unyielding.

"You are certain, *da*?" She twiddled the hex wrench between her fingers.

"It's not a nuclear bomb," he said, but a nerve in his cheek twitched. "I'm worried about the phone, though."

"Phone is good for tracking. Simple, effective for whole of Metrozone. Is also good for detonator. Call number, big boom." She scraped around in the bottom of the tool box. "Frequency of phone?"

"Nine hundred megahertz. I can feel it desperately trying to tag a base station."

She held up a handset that looked very much like a phone itself and punched some buttons on the control pad. "There. Does not matter whether network up, down or in-between." She propped the handset up against the side of the bomb.

"You realize," he said, stomach twisting as he thought of it, "when I was dialing at random trying to connect with the special Jihad phone, I could have got this one first."

"Then we would have big crater and no answers," she replied, as if it would have been just one of those things.

"Shall we get on with it? Iguro's getting impatient."

She looked around at the man standing by the van's rear doors. "He can stay close, if he wants. This size cylinder enough to hold maybe seventy-five, hundred kilos explosive. Safe distance is half kilometer."

"Yeah, okay." Petrovitch shuffled bent-backed to the back of the van and shouted over Iguro's thinning hair. "Tabletop?"

"What is it?"

"You might want to take Lucy for a walk. At least to the end of the street: the very end."

She came over, puzzled. "I thought you said…"

"We're playing it safe. Tina's spidey-sense is tingling and I've got a bad case of last-minute doubts. Just because it's not got two sub-critical lumps of uranium at each end doesn't mean that it couldn't contain enough cee-four to put all of us into orbit."

Iguro frowned. “Petrovitch-san, are you saying there is a bomb after all?”

He pulled a face. “Maybe. If you want to pull your men back, Tina suggests five hundred meters would be sensible.”

“What is to stop you from taking the bomb when we are so far away?”

“You mean, apart from the lamp-post lying on top of a van whose engine we just shot up? Or that we’d have to carry it to Tina’s car in full view of everyone while leaving Tabletop and Lucy behind? Let me see…” Petrovitch cuffed Iguro around the head. “*Yobany stos,* man.”

Recoiling, Iguro batted Petrovitch’s hand away. “I will stay to keep an eye on you. Miss Sonja would expect it.”

“Your funeral. Not that there’ll be anything left of you to bury, but at least it’ll be quick.” He fixed Tabletop with his gaze. “Get the girl out of here. You’ll know soon enough if there’s anything to worry about.”

Tabletop went over to where Lucy was standing and linked arms with her, guiding her away. Petrovitch watched them go, and then settled back down next to Valentina. “Now we’re ready.”

She held out the wrench to the first bolt and started slowly to unwind it. “You should go too,” she said.

“I’m not going to do that.”

“You are important.” She stopped turning the wrench as a couple of millimeters of thread appeared at the bottom, and moved on to the next one. “I am expendable.”

“You’re important to me. So shut up and concentrate on this.”

She nodded, and with the vague hint of a smile, went round each bolt in turn and loosened them off. Iguro watched intently, and wisely said nothing.

“Please, put hand on plate. Keep pressed down until I say.”

Petrovitch did as he was told. The cover sank very slightly under his palm, back to flush against the casing. Valentina spun the bolts out and lined them up on the floor of the van next to her knee. Then she crouched right down, a flashlight in her hand and her eyes level with the edge of the inspection plate.

“Just a little bit. Let it rise.”

He programmed his arm for a half-millimeter of movement.

“More.” She peered intently at the pitch-black gap, then felt in her box for a marker pen. She bit the top off and made a green dot part-way along the opening.

“Because?”

She spat the pen lid out of her mouth behind her. “There is pressure switch. Again, I do not know what it does, but I would prefer it not activated.” She retrieved a slim knife-blade and slipped it inside

the cover where she'd made her mark, using only her fingertips and the smallest of movements. When she was happy with the blade's position, she used electrical tape to hold it in place. "Is okay. Lift cover off."

It was easier said than done. Petrovitch finally caught its sides with his fingernails and lifted it gently out of the way.

And now that he could see inside, he sucked in air through his teeth. "*Chyort.*"

There was a foam square, out of which was cut a smaller rectangle. A mobile phone nestled deep within, and a braided pair of red and yellow wires curled along its side before diving back underneath. All around it were packed stiff plastic wrappers containing blocks of what looked like window putty.

About half of the blocks had a thin silver tube pressed through a slit in the plastic and buried almost up to the wires that snaked off them.

"As you say," said Valentina. "Is bad."

"I can record this, and we can get out of here if you want."

"The phone will have been tested. We must retrieve it to see by who." She brushed a stray hair back behind her ear.

"If you think you can do that, then great." Petrovitch beckoned Iguro closer. "Take a look. No nuclear material at all. Just a shitload of high explosive, designed to incinerate the evidence and whoever happened to be standing around it at the time."

"This is good news." Iguro craned his neck to see, and Petrovitch helped him up into the van proper. Once he was satisfied, he turned to go: "No atomic bomb is good news. I must tell Miss Sonja at once."

Petrovitch reached into his waistband and pulled out his gun. He pointed it at Iguro's head. He was close enough that the barrel pressed into his temple. "Sit down over there and shut up. She already knows because I told her, and until I find out what the *huy* is going on, you're not going anywhere."

Iguro took the hint and crawled into the furthest recesses of the van, where he sat and muttered.

Valentina turned her attention to the small hole in the side of the bomb where the electrical cable had been wrenched out. She put her eye to the hole and was still for a while. "Hmm. Not connected to anything. Dummy."

She straightened up and tutted, staring into the heart of the bomb. "I would like to disconnect batteries first, then phone. But batteries are underneath."

"If I was going to make this, I'd want easy access to everything before final assembly. Maybe the whole thing just pulls out as one unit." He gave Iguro one last baleful glare and reholstered his gun.

“There is tamper switch on cover. Another underneath would be undetectable.” Valentina demonstrated with her hands.

“It’s your call,” said Petrovitch. His mouth was dry, in contrast to his palms, which were soft with sweat.

In answer, she scraped around in her tool box and found a pair of surgical scissors. She started to snip away at the foam surround, always taking care she wasn’t cutting a wire. A pile of gray foam trimmings piled up beside her, and inside the bomb, the shape of things became clearer.

Under the phone was a thin piece of plywood with four small rectangular batteries tied to it, and a small square of circuit board. Tiny electronic components were soldered to it. Valentina moved aside, and Petrovitch squatted down.

“Okay. The batteries supply thirty-six volts to the detonators. That black square’s going to be a logic gate, which will act as a switch. When the phone rings, you get a voltage on that red wire—that should set the bomb off. But,” he said, and traced the wires back to the switch on the cover, “only if this wire is live. Which it still is, because we’ve taped this into the on position. See that little button battery there? It’s telling the chip that the cover’s still in place.”

“Is not tamper switch. Is fail-safe.” Valentina snorted in disgust. “Schoolgirl error.”

“Meh. No harm done. It just means that the people who set the bomb didn’t want to blow themselves up by accident.”

She handed him a tiny pair of wire cutters.

“Oh.” He flexed his fingers and lowered his hand slowly into the recess. He knew he was right. The circuit was simple and effective—just the sort he would have used if he’d been into bombmaking. He could have knocked one up just the same given half an hour, just using bits and pieces lying around his makeshift lab.

“You are hesitating.”

“Yeah. Give me a moment. This is still a big deal.”

“You were ready to defuse it when you thought it was nuclear.”

“Stopping fission is easy, if you don’t mind the cloud of uranium particles drifting in the breeze. A couple of house bricks thrown in the middle of a gun-style device would work.” Petrovitch pulled his hand out and wiped it against his trousers. He adjusted his grip on the cutters and went in for a second time.

“Cut the wires,” she said after a few moments more.

“*Yobany stos.* I’m doing it, all right?” He steeled himself and placed the red wire from the phone between the sharp jaws. “See you in Hell.”

He closed his fist. The wire snicked. They were both still there, with Iguro crouched behind them.

Valentina wrapped the loose ends of the wire in strips of insulating tape, and waited for him to cut the second wire. It was easier than the first, but only slightly.

"I'd be happier when those batteries are out of the loop."

"Then do it. Is fine."

He checked the polarity on the batteries one last time, and snipped through the wires, red first, then black. Valentina made them safe with more tape, and Petrovitch sat back.

"Couldn't do that for a living." He let out the breath he'd been holding in, and Valentina presumed to ruffle his hair.

"We have defused bomb. We have lots of plastic explosive and detonators. And," she said, lifting the phone clear and tugging out the remaining wire, "we have this."

"Yeah. We do. We have a slight problem to go with it, though." He took the phone from her and scanned the call history. "It's going to take a little longer to restore the network and everything that depends on it, than it did to take it down."

"Explain."

"There's this kid—an American—called himself Anarchy. Wrote a virus that I may have helped him with now and again without him knowing it was me. He set it loose on some government computers, whose servers promptly crashed and burned. Every time they rebooted, the Anarchy virus popped up and trashed them again: they're still mopping up the last of it now. Of course, what no one seems to have realized is that you can modify it to leave it dormant on a system. While it's not undetectable, it's pretty stealthy: you have to know what you're looking for."

"You have broken the internets. Is that what you are saying?"

"Pretty much." Petrovitch shrugged. "I was in a hurry, so I cashed in all my chips at once. If I had my rat, I could get an uplink to the nearest satellite. As it is, what with the state of emergency, all the people who could at least attempt to fix things are stuck at home."

"And we are stuck out here." She retrieved the board with the batteries and slid it behind her. "We cannot call our friends, our enemies, or the wider world. We can tell no one that there is no bomb or present them our evidence. We cannot find out who made this bomb or why."

"So we're on our own. That shouldn't stop us, should it?"

"It might, this time." She started to pull the detonators out, one by one, and pile the explosives up like a wall.

Petrovitch moved to the back of the van and sat there, legs dangling. He patted the space next to him. "Iguro, come and join me."

In the distance, he could see the knot of Oshicora guards and the two slight figures of Tabletop and Lucy. He waved the all-clear.

Iguro warily sat next to him but unconsciously mirroring his body language. “Miss Sonja should still be told. She will lift the emergency, and exonerate you.”

“Like I said, I think she knew all along.” Petrovitch frowned. “I take it you’re not going to try and arrest me now, or anything embarrassing like that?”

“There seems little point. There is no bomb, so how could you have stolen something that does not exist?”

“And yet, there it is, in plain view. Tell me, Iguro: how did you know where the van was?”

“We were directed to it. By our controllers.”

“Of course you were. Now, how do you suppose they could differentiate between us and the van containing the bomb, given we were all going in the same direction at the same time, and there was no visual identification of which phone signals related to which vehicle?”

When Iguro didn’t answer, he continued his musing.

“You see my problem? Everything points to someone within the Oshicora organization knowing exactly where this fake bomb was, at all times. And I’m guessing that even though no one was ever supposed to see inside and learn the truth, whoever designed this whole charade knew I’d be chasing around after it—and on the off-chance that I managed to get my hands on it, they made it so that I couldn’t possibly blow myself up. I wonder who would go to all that trouble?” He leaned into Iguro, who was looking increasingly uncomfortable. “Why is everything pointing back to me? Who could possibly want to frame me for something so monstrous, and yet at the same time sabotage their plan because they couldn’t bear the thought of harming me?”

He kicked his heels for a moment longer, then jumped down from the back of the van. Tabletop and Lucy were almost there.

A thought struck him, and he turned back to Valentina. “Have you seen the time?”

She glanced at her big Soviet-style wristwatch. “What of it?”

“What do I normally do now?”

“You climb the Oshicora Tower.” She looked up from the bomb, eyebrows raised. “And people come to watch.”

“Yeah. They do.” Petrovitch kicked a stone in the road. “I wonder if anyone’s going to show?”

18

Petrovitch rode with Iguro, the cars becoming a slow-moving convoy back down to the center of the city. They skirted Regent's Park and stopped on Marylebone Road.

"What are you going to do?" asked Petrovitch.

"I must report back to Miss Sonja," said Iguro. He left the motor running, but put the gear into neutral. "She must learn of all that has occurred since we lost contact—something which is entirely your fault."

"Sue me. I was being tracked through the prophet's phone, and I get pissed off when people track me. And I rather assumed those same people were trying to kill me, too." The power in his arm batteries was getting worryingly low, but he had to move it now and again, just to relieve the pressure of bits of metal sticking into his side. "Tell her what you like."

"There is no more than a week before the Freezone is handed back to the authorities. This delay will cost Miss Sonja greatly."

"If that's all she's worried about, I'll cover the penalties myself."

"You?" Iguro had a strange laugh, more like he was gasping for breath.

"Yeah. I'm a very rich man. Didn't you know?"

From baring his teeth in mirth, his lips became thin lines. "How is that possible?"

"One of those things where you use the capitalist system against itself. I borrowed some money, and used it as leverage to short-sell oil on the spot market. When I say oil, I mean a lot of it, of course. Crude was trading at around a hundred and eighty U.S. dollars two days ago: I promised to sell twenty-five million barrels to whoever wanted it at one seventy, close of play yesterday. I sold the lot in seconds."

"But where would you find that amount of oil?"

"Look, the oil doesn't actually exist. It could have been sugar, cocoa, aluminium or pork bellies—it doesn't matter. What matters is that I bet everything on the price of oil dropping below one seventy. I could pretend to buy it, and then pretend to sell it to the traders who'd snapped up my futures because they thought I was mad." Petrovitch shrugged. "I barely understand it myself. It's a stupid way of doing business. But because I actually bought the oil as it dipped below fifty dollars, I made one hundred and twenty dollars a barrel. After brokers' fees, I made a shade under three billion dollars—about five and a half billion euros."

Iguro reached forward and turned the engine off, and sat in

silence, digesting the news.

"How did you know that would happen?"

"I knew because I was about to offer the world cheap energy forever. Oil's still going to be useful, but we're not going to be burning it in engines. Not that that got in the way of a market stampede to the bottom. By the time sanity had been restored, I'd done the deal."

"You could buy whatever you want. Anything. Anything at all." He was awestruck.

Petrovitch wedged his knees against the dashboard. "The stuff I want most I can't buy. This is just seed money: there's hard work to be done if I want to make real things grow. You know, stuff that actually lasts. But like I said, I think Sonja's got other things on her mind than her contractual obligations."

"You wish me to deliver a message to her?"

"If you could."

Tabletop tapped on the window, and Petrovitch cracked the door open.

"Problem?" she asked.

"Not really. Just explaining something to Iguro." He opened the door wider and slipped out. "I think he might finally get it this time."

"Petrovitch-san. The message?" Iguro leaned over from the driver's seat to see him better.

"Yeah, that." He scratched at his nose. "How about 'I know what you've done and the moment I get to prove it is the moment you start running'? That's a bit melodramatic, though, and she's never been one for running. I could always go for the menacing 'I know where you live,' but she knows I know, so what would be the point? Just tell her the CIA tried to steal the nuclear bomb from the New Machine Jihad. That should give her some indication how deep in the shit she's swimming."

He slammed the door, obscuring Iguro's open mouth.

Tabletop watched the car spin its wheels in an effort to get away from them. "Do you think she's going to kill him?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't have fancied being one of the techs who put the bomb together though. If any of them are still alive, I'll be very surprised. It's not like we lack building sites." Petrovitch looked at the silent cranes that dominated the skyline. "Why did she do it?"

"You still don't know for sure that she did, Sam."

"Yeah, I do. It's just time to stop making excuses for her."

"So where does the priest fit in?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I mean, if Tina's right, and part of his plan is that he makes sure me and Maddy split up permanently… what does he hope happens next?"

"Sam, get in the car."

He did as he was told. The Oshicora cars went left toward the Post Office Tower, and theirs went right toward Hyde Park. He was ten minutes late for the show—except there'd be no performance today. No webcams, no streaming, no blog comment or news footage. Just him and whoever might break the curfew and turn up. It was almost like the first few weeks of his calculated act of defiance, before it became the media event he couldn't stop doing.

Valentina drove past their hotel and the Wellington Monument, down Piccadilly. She eased her foot off the accelerator as the rubble of the Oshicora building came into view between the rising skyscrapers on either side of the plot.

It was swarming with people, each of them taking something from the mound and carrying it away. There wasn't much space around for the debris to go: instead, spontaneous barricades were collecting on all the approach roads.

The car stopped in front of a ragged line of concrete blocks that lay across both carriageways, and Petrovitch watched as the workers —mostly construction types in their usual laboring wear, but also office staff who had discarded their jackets or high heels or both, and overalled sanitation crews, and cooks and drivers and a good number of blue-covered Oshicora employees—carried more fragments of glass, metal and stone and placed them down.

"What are they doing?"

Lucy leaned in next to him. "I know you're smart and everything, but really. What does it look like they're doing?"

"No, I know what they're doing. It should have been more like, they have to stop doing it. Now." He got out and stared at the ant-hill of activity.

"And how are you going to get them to do that?" Lucy stood next to him and surveyed the scene.

"I'm going to talk to them," said Petrovitch. He blinked. "Yeah, that's scary."

He took a deep breath and started forward. They parted for him, looking at him with reverence as he walked by. Then they carried on under the weight of their heavy loads.

Lucy stayed close, and when he got to the bottom of the rubble pile, he reached down to help her up. His arm seized completely.

"Ah, *oblom.*" He looked at the now-useless exoskeleton supporting his shattered bones.

"Do you want me get you some more batteries?"

"It doesn't matter. Better off getting me a saw." He used his right hand to force the hinges into an acceptable shape, before letting the arm fall uselessly by his side. "Come on."

The further they climbed, the fewer people they met, until at last

they were above the crowd. The geography of the pile had changed: more pieces of the fallen tower had been shifted in the time it had taken to reach their present height than had been thrown off by Petrovitch in all the preceding months.

Coming down the side street was a digger, spewing blue fumes into the air.

"Look at them," said Petrovitch. "A couple of days, and we'd be there: all the way down to the basement. They'd work day and night: keep going until it was all gone."

"Then why don't you let them?" Lucy steadied herself using his shoulder. "They want to do it."

"Because we're being watched, whether we like it or not. Right up there, beyond the atmosphere, the American satellites will be looking down on us and there's nothing I can do about that. I'm guessing Mackensie is in his war room right now, staring at the top of my head and wondering how many nukes it'll take to bunker-bust Michael's coffin." He smiled sadly at her. "I can't let that happen. These people, they think they're doing the right thing, but every bit of rebar they drag out and pile up means it's less likely that I can get Michael out, not more."

"They're just copying you," she said. "What was that all about if you didn't mean it to work?"

"I'll tell you later. Right now, we have to attract several thousands of people's attention and get them close enough that I can shout at them."

They stood there, but that didn't seem to work at all. So he drew his gun and was about to waste some bullets when Lucy placed two fingers in her mouth and let out an ear-splitting whistle.

"*Yobany stos,* girl. Some warning, okay?"

She grinned at him, even as the dying echo of her whistle bounced around the surrounding buildings.

The people closest to them stopped. They dropped what they were carrying, and started to gather. The ripple spread outward: the crowd in front of Petrovitch grew more dense. After five minutes, he had everyone, even the driver of the digger.

They were all looking at him, and he knew there was no way out of this. He cleared his throat noisily, scratched at his ear, and adjusted his left arm again.

"Hello," he said.

Some of them even said hello back.

"You're probably wondering why I asked you here today—but that's not true: you're here because you wanted to be here, despite everything that's gone on today and the fact that you're not supposed to be here at all. I'm touched. No, I'm moved. I didn't know you

thought that much…" He ground to a halt, and looked to Lucy for inspiration.

"Go on. Tell them," she urged.

So he did.

"I love you all." He stopped, then started again when he realized that he actually felt that way. "You're brilliant. Loads of you have seen your houses wrecked, your friends and your families run out of town, you've lost people you care about and your lives have been turned upside down. But you're still here, still thinking about the future and how you can build it bigger and better and brighter. The Freezone is more than a job to you. It's part of you and you want to make it work. And it will work, because you care enough to make a go of it.

"Problem is, we've been let down. You all know about Container Zero and the New Machine Jihad. You all know that I've been accused of threatening those in charge of the Freezone with a nuclear bomb unless they let Michael out. That's enough to turn anyone against me: Samuil Petrovitch the Armageddonist. And you came anyway, not out of fear, but because you knew a different Sam Petrovitch, one who would die to save the city.

"Which is why I'm going to ask you to stop. You're going to get us all killed if you carry on. This city's stood for two thousand years: I want it to be here for another two thousand, and I want the rest of the land beyond the cordon to be opened up, and I want peace with the Outies, and I want your children and theirs to build on the ruins of all the old villages and towns and cities and live forever. That can only happen if the Freezone survives.

"So, what I want you to do is this: go to work. Go and tell your shift. Bang on doors and shout in the streets. It's time to go to work. It's perfectly safe. There is no bomb, and there never was. I want you to let me deal with the consequences of that. What I can't do is your jobs. You know what you do best. You know your wiring, your plumbing, your plastering, your welding, your digging, whatever it is you do. Today is a work day, and people are sitting in their domiks, in their hostels, wondering what the *huy* is going on. Get them out. Get them working.

"I appreciate we've got little or no power at the moment, you can't call anybody up, you can't check computers for plans and figures. I'm going to have to fix that shortly. But you need to be ready for when the Freezone comes alive again, so we don't miss a moment more than we have to.

"I'm guessing that to get here, you had to dodge patrols and sneak past road blocks. On your way back, don't worry about them. You'll be challenged—why you're not obeying the curfew—but this is how you respond: we've got work to do. Don't be put off. Don't let yourself

be persuaded otherwise. We've all got work to do. Let's not waste any more time with this: I'm just prattling on now, and you're going to get bored soon."

Someone laughed, and Petrovitch was eternally grateful.

"Go on. We all know what it is we're supposed to be doing. So let's do it."

He walked down, like Moses off the mountain, his left arm dragging his whole body to one side. The crowd, rather than moving out of his way, came closer still. It seemed that what they wanted to do first, before anything else, was to touch him. Those who couldn't make their way through the press of bodies surrounding him started to applaud him.

He became separated from Lucy. He could feel her fingers slip away from him, and there was nothing he could do about it.

"*Pizdets,*" he muttered under his breath. "Utter *pizdets.*"

Then someone came to his rescue. She put her strong arm around him and shielded him as she eased him through the crowd—gently but firmly so as not to upset anyone, giving them time to reach out for him without allowing him to get crushed.

"Thanks," he said.

"You're welcome," said Madeleine. "Where's your car?"

"West side of Piccadilly."

She carefully changed direction. "What happened to your arm?"

"Ran out of watts. Can you see Lucy?"

Using her height, she quickly scanned the tops of the nearby heads. "I'll go back for her. Let's get you to safety first."

Madeleine kept going, calm and relentless, up to the barricade, over it, and to the front passenger door of the car. She stood there, holding it open while he got in, and closed it slowly so that fingers didn't get trapped.

Then she climbed up onto the hood to try and locate Lucy.

Valentina tutted. "Look: bodywork is dented."

"You should worry. My bodywork is more than dented." Petrovitch hauled his arm around so it laid on his lap, and looked up at Madeleine's leather-clad legs. He was momentarily distracted, so that he didn't answer Valentina straightaway.

Only when the view cleared and Madeleine started back through the crowd did he acknowledge her.

"Sorry. What was that?"

"I said, does this mean we are now in charge?"

"Yeah. No. I guess so. Looks like you've got your revolution after all."

19

Once they were all back together again, there was a long awkward silence. Lucy was squashed in between Tabletop on one side and Madeleine on the other. Valentina tapped the dash with her keys, while Petrovitch was busy trying to work out just what the hell he'd told everyone he'd do.

It meant rewinding the file and cringing like a stray dog in a street fight. He realized he'd backed himself into a corner, and there was only one way to make good his promises.

All the while, the silence stretched on. The crowd were dispersing, and were already visibly thinned.

"I think I owe you all an apology," said Madeleine. She shifted, leathers creaking. "Sorry."

If anyone was in a forgiving mood, they hid it well.

"Do you know," said Valentina, "how much trouble we are in?" Novosibirsk on mid-winter's day would have been warmer.

"I have some idea."

Tabletop leaned forward, while Lucy shrank in her seat. "My ex-colleagues from the CIA turned up. There were more of them than we expected. Then we discovered that the supposed nuclear bomb was packed with plastic, to be triggered by a mobile phone that Sonja Oshicora's personal security detail was actively tracking. Sam's activated a virus that has shut the city down. And apparently we're now responsible for the Freezone having seized it in a popular uprising."

"Oh. Okay."

"Enough," muttered Petrovitch.

"She has ruined everything!" Valentina slammed her hands on the steering wheel. "You had plans, *da?* I know you had plans even if I did not know what they were. I trusted you—still trust you to get us out of this, this mess. But best chances we had have gone. Because of her."

"I said, enough." He dragged at his arm, and wondered if he could plug himself directly into the power socket set underneath the air-con. "Battle plans never survive contact with the enemy. We can change them; we were always going to have to change them. That's not the problem."

"No, problem sits behind you." Even furious, Valentina had no color to her face. It was her eyes that burned with bright fire. "She has betrayed you."

"Stop it now. I appreciate that we've all been living on adrenaline for the last few hours, but it's nothing a massive fry-up and some

mugs of coffee wouldn't cure. Before anyone else says something they might regret, please take a moment to think about everything that's happened, and more importantly, why."

"I know why. Your wife cannot keep her mouth shut."

"*Yebani v'rot.* If Maddy is guilty of anything, it's trusting a millennia-old tradition of confidentiality between priest and penitent. I'm pissed off, too, but I'm trying to direct my anger in the right direction."

"Can I?" said Lucy in a very quiet voice. She struggled with her elbows to gain some extra space, and sat forward. "Sam, do you remember when we first met?"

"I broke into your house. You were hiding in the bath."

"That's not what I mean. The play. The school play I was supposed to be doing."

"To be fair, I had my hands full that day." He twisted in his seat to see her better as she leaned over his shoulder. "Refresh my memory."

"*Romeo and Juliet.* You know," and she quoted in a rush: " 'O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name; or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, and I'll no longer be a Capulet.' "

"Yeah, I know it. It's better in the original Russian. So what?"

She pointed at him. "Romeo." Then at Madeleine. "Juliet."

Everybody else took a breath before starting their objections, and all stopped on the first syllable before grinding to a halt as their mental gears stalled.

"It's like, you know: two households, both alike in dignity, in fair Verona, where we lay our scene. From ancient grudge break to new mutiny, where civil blood makes civil hands unclean. But what if Juliet hadn't killed herself, and they'd lived together like a normal couple? Her family would have hated it. And his. The idea that they would have kissed and made up is stupid. They would have worked together to split them up, then gone back to stabbing each other in the street."

Petrovitch frowned. "Is this actually relevant? Because I've accidentally just organized a coup, and I could probably do with paying some attention to that."

"This is the whole reason for everything!" Lucy knew she wasn't explaining herself well, and she grunted with annoyance. "Montagues and Capulets. You two have separated over Michael. But neither of you wants to make it permanent because you actually do love each other. So you need a push. Sonja Oshicora wants you, right?"

"As uncomfortable as it makes me to admit it, yeah." He didn't feel able to meet anyone's eye at that moment.

“That means she needs Madeleine out of the way. How’s she going to do that? She can’t just kill her, because that won’t work. She needs you to hate her.” Lucy directed her forensic gaze at Madeleine. “This priest of yours: he wants you to go back to the Church. Is he going to get you to do that by killing Sam? Is he even going to try and kill Sam, knowing how well protected he is? No. What he can do is make you hate him.” She threw up her hands. “How come this is so obvious to me, but not to you bunch of emotionally retarded grown-ups? They’re working together. Sonja and the priest.”

Petrovitch sat back around and stared straight ahead. “Oh, you have to be *yebani* joking. This whole thing has been contrived to…” His face set hard. “*Sic sukam sim.*”

“Sam?” said Madeleine, bewildered.

“I am not a piece of meat. I will not be owned by anyone. And I will absolutely not be the *peshka* in anyone’s game.” His heart was spinning fast, too fast: the tips of his fingers were tingling and his head felt like it was going to pop like an over-inflated balloon. He took several deep breaths and deliberately braked the turbine in his chest. Too hard. He felt fuzzy, almost fainting. It was almost as it was before he’d had the implant. “*Chyort.*”

“Get him out of the car. He’s crashing.”

There was a sudden scramble around him, and he was dragged out and laid on the ground. He saw sky and cloud, and felt road and rubble. He was cold, colder than he’d ever been, like he’d been frozen and all these people leaning over him were defrosting his body with nothing more than good wishes and concerned looks.

“No CPR! It doesn’t work like that.”

“How does it work then?”

“It’s not like there’s a panel I can pop open.”

His T-shirt was pulled up, and the surgical tape that held the slim computer to his body was ripped free.

“I don’t even know if I can access it. It’s not the rat.”

“Give it to me. You’re panicking and we don’t have the time.”

“Can you find anything?”

“What’s it called?”

“I don’t—wait: Sorenson. Search for Sorenson.”

“Spelt right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Just stop pointing at the screen. No. No. No again. Wait.”

“That slider. Put it halfway.”

“There?”

And the blood surged back through his body. His heart wasn’t designed to go from a standing start, but it did well enough. As his blood pressure returned to something approaching normal, Petrovitch

grimaced and gurned.

"I didn't know I could do that," he said eventually.

"You turned your own heart off."

He blinked and tried to find the speaker: Madeleine. "Looks that way. I'm going to have to script up some sort of safety net for that."

She pushed the others aside and raised him into a sitting position. "Never do that again."

"What? It's not like I haven't died before." He took a breath of fresh, cold air and found it didn't hurt.

Madeleine cuffed his head lightly. "And I was there for most of them, which is why I don't want to go back to that." She chewed at her lip. "You believe her, don't you?"

"Lucy? You know how much of a fan I am of Occam's Razor."

"Sam, what are we going to do?" She pulled at her plait and dragged it over her shoulder. "I can't believe how stupid I've been."

"It's been staring us in the face since the very start. But I was looking for one person who knew everything, and the reason I could never work out who was because there was two of them." He tried to flex his left arm. His fingers would move, but the rest of it had set solid. He couldn't overcome the resistance offered by the motors. "As to what we're going to do…"

Petrovitch dragged himself upright and restuck the computer to his side. He set his face in the direction of the Post Office Tower, but his view was obscured by Madeleine, who moved in front of him. She put the flat of her hand against his chest.

"No." Her voice was firm.

"Out of the *yebani* way. I'm going to rip her a new *zhopu* with this," and he brandished his broken arm, "then I'm going to see how well she flies."

"You can't do that."

"I'm pretty sure I can. I'm pretty sure that no one's going to stop me from doing it either." He looked up into his wife's face. "She won't lift a finger to save herself, because she loves me."

"Do you really think that? Do you really believe she's not going to fight to keep what she has?"

"She has nothing left." Petrovitch gestured to the rubble pile. "She's lost the Freezone, she's lost me, she's lost the *nikkeijin,* the organization around her is falling apart, she's got no home, no purpose, no inheritance and no legacy."

"Then maybe," said Madeleine, "you should just leave her alone for the moment. Not that we both don't have a reckoning with her at some point…"

"And with the priest."

"And with John. He's lost everything too. His very identity as a

priest, even. But if Sonja's lost the Freezone, who's there to catch it if it falls?"

Still he tried to go through her, to get at Sonja. "I saved her. And for what? So she could do this to me?"

Madeleine pushed him hard enough to rock him back on his heels. "You just told these people to go to work. They don't have electricity or computers, thanks to you. That means you haven't got the time to spare on this self-indulgent crap, because like them, you have work to do."

"Don't you want to get at her? At Father fucking John?"

She lowered her voice to barely a whisper. "Oh yes. But they can wait. Look at their plans—what have they come to? Nothing. We have a city to run, we have another CIA hit-squad to find. We have a thousand and one people to talk to, to assure them that we're not going to drop the ball."

Petrovitch fumed. "I know what you're saying makes more sense. But I still prefer my version."

"I prefer your version. It's just a shame we don't have the luxury of doing what we want. You always said the Freezone was a good idea because it was your idea: are you going to throw it away because you want to act out your revenge fantasies?"

"It's so very tempting." He stopped his attempts to bull his way past her. "*Yobany stos,* all right. Have it your way."

Valentina looked pointedly at her watch, and Petrovitch scowled.

"Like you're a *yebani* metronome. You might not show it, but you're just as pissed as I am."

She conceded the point. "So what do we do? And in what order do we do it?"

"I need this arm back. That's not going to happen until I get the power back on. I would also like something to eat and drink because it's been a very long time since any of us have done either. That's not going to happen until I get the power back. These good people need to do some work, and guess what?" Petrovitch wandered away across the road, staring down every so often. His lips moved silently as he counted.

"Sam, what are you doing?" called Lucy.

Petrovitch eventually pointed to a black metal cover set into the tarmac. "We need to get this one up."

She turned to Tabletop, standing beside her. "What's he doing?"

"I have no idea."

"I do," said Madeleine, cupping her hands around her mouth. "I thought the idea was to persuade everyone we hadn't lost the plot."

He shouted back. "You want power? This is how we get it. In every way."

While Valentina went to fetch the tire iron from the trunk of the car, the other three went over to where Petrovitch was standing.

Madeleine crouched down next to the manhole. “You realize the Yanks are going to want to nuke us if we do this. We’ve dodged a pretend atomic bomb only to walk into the path of a real one.”

“You asked me if I had a plan for when I got him out. I did then, and I still do.” He took a step back and allowed Valentina to dig the edge of the iron between the cover and the lip of the hole. “I’ve let the Americans dictate what happens to Michael for too long. No more.”

As the cover broke free of the collected muck that held it down, Madeleine dug her fingers under it and dragged it scraping to one side. There was a brick-lined black hole, and a ladder thick with rust descending into it.

“We are going to get Michael, *da*?” Valentina threw the tire iron aside.

“Yeah, we are.” Petrovitch flipped his feet into the hole and adjusted his useless arm down to fit close by his side. He toed the first rung, testing his weight on it. “We’re going to need the cee-four.”

Tabletop looked at the distance between them and the tower. “Okay. But let me go first. We’ve come too far to let any more surprises get in the way.” She pulled the hood of her stealth suit over her head and covered her eyes with the integral goggles.

Petrovitch moved to one side, and she used partly him, partly the road, to lower herself into the void. She swarmed down the ladder and, within moments, was out of sight.

“Right,” he said to those remaining. “Down the rabbit hole.”

20

Away from the small circle of light, the darkness was like a wall. Petrovitch switched to infrared, and watched while Madeleine descended.

"Still not that sweet," she said, and raised her arms to guide Lucy's feet onto the corroded metal rungs for the last few steps. "You're there."

"What is this place?"

Petrovitch was about to answer, when Madeleine cut in, sounding casual: "It's a river. An underground river running through the heart of London."

"Then why can I smell, you know…" Lucy looked around her, then at her feet.

"Because it doubles as a sewer."

"Eww."

Valentina swung herself over the hole in the road and held out her AK. Madeleine took it and passed it to Petrovitch, who could actually see where he was pointing it.

"Case. You catch." She dropped a steel briefcase and Madeleine caught it cleanly. "Do not get wet."

"You might want to warn me before you start throwing explosives around."

"Hmm," said Valentina, and trip-trapped down the ladder, "and you might warn us before telling lying priest everything."

"Knock it off." Petrovitch stepped out of the alcove and into the tunnel proper.

"In Soviet Union, priests were shot."

"Tina. Really."

"Against wall. With blindfold."

"*Yobany stos, past' zabej!*" He thought about leaving the two of them to get on with it, but Lucy was also present, and there wasn't much room for hand-to-hand combat without hurting the bystanders. "Just leave it upstairs, okay? Down here it's cold, it's dark, it's got water and slime, and shortly we'll be setting off some shaped charges. We all have to work together, whether some of you like it or not."

Petrovitch retrieved Lucy and put her mid-stream, then dragged Madeleine up behind him.

"Tina, go behind Lucy, hold her hand. Maddy, get Lucy's other hand and grab hold of me. And no pulling or shoving. Or I'll tell teacher."

He led the way upstream, to find that Tabletop had already

discovered the breach in the culvert's wall. She'd turned the lights on, and was exploring the gently sloping tunnel.

Lucy climbed in first, then Valentina, and Madeleine boosted Petrovitch through the hole before stepping up herself.

"Right," said Petrovitch, "let's get all the 'how did you know this was here?', 'when did you do this?' and 'frankly this looks ludicrously unstable, what were you thinking?' questions out of the way before we start. I've been at this for eleven months, and I would have got away with it but for recent events. Needs must, however. At the far end is the outside of a concrete tube that should lead straight to the quantum computer beneath the Oshicora Tower. There's about half a meter's worth of ferroconcrete between us and it, and it would be brilliant if we can cut through it without collapsing this tunnel." He looked at Valentina's pale, pinched face in the glimmering light. "Can you get us through?"

"Concrete, yes. Rebar is problem. I will need to take two, three separate blasts to cut metal rods." She lifted her case onto her outstretched legs and popped the catches.

Tabletop pressed her hand against the curved wall she was crouching next to. "When were you going to tell us? I mean, I suppose you could have chosen never to do so."

"I always thought," said Petrovitch, "that I'd be able to do this on my own. That I wouldn't have to involve any of you in this, well, highly illegal enterprise. Freezone signed up to both the UN resolutions and imposed their own penalties."

"Ten years," murmured Madeleine, "or an unlimited fine. Or both."

"Bearing in mind I can record this, and we're in charge now: all those in favor of revoking that particular law?" Petrovitch raised his right arm and glanced up at it.

Madeleine put her hand on the tunnel roof, Lucy's pale fingers wiggled in the half-light, and Valentina looked up from her makings long enough to register her approval.

"Tabletop?"

"I'm not a citizen," she said. "I'm not really anyone."

"Executive order. You are now."

"Do you think my—the Americans: they're going to want to stop you."

"Yeah. And we already know there's another CIA team of who knows how many agents. Or they could just drop a missile on our heads, and this time it might not be a thermobaric warhead."

"Fuck them." She showed her hand.

"Unanimous. Tina, do your worst. Everyone else out."

Tabletop stayed behind to help Valentina, while Madeleine

helped Petrovitch get back out into the main tunnel. The blue-white glow from inside the hole glittered against the drops of moisture on the brickwork.

"Seriously," asked Lucy, standing as close as she could to Petrovitch and shivering. "Were you ever going to tell us?"

"I didn't want to give them any reason for thinking you had anything to do with this."

"Them. But Madeleine would have had to arrest you. She wouldn't… would she?"

"Just another reason not to tell anyone. She'd sworn to uphold the Freezone law. Giving her a dilemma like that?" He puffed out his breath and watched it condense in the cold, still air. "Yeah, I would have told you. Long after the event, long after we'd…"

"We'd what?" She pushed in against him and leaned her head against his shoulder.

"We're getting out of here. All of us. Including Michael. This," and he pointed up and down the tunnel with his right hand, draped over Lucy's shoulder, "this isn't how I'd planned it. We were supposed to show a clean pair of heels, just slip away in the night in a 'my work here is done' sort of way. Now, we're going to be born in blood and fire whether we like it or not."

"Doesn't sound good."

"Meh. We'll be fine. It's everyone else I'm worried about, especially the ones who get worked up about AIs: they get all unpredictable and dangerous, and I don't like that."

"Just one other thing. You know you had me make one of those singularity bombs every day, off the renderer?"

"Yeah. I used them every night down here."

"I know that now, but I thought you were hoarding them. I," and she coughed, "might have made some spares."

"What the *chyort* did you think I was going to do with three hundred bombs? Start a war?"

"It's not like you haven't done that before," she mumbled. "I thought I was helping."

"How many?" asked Petrovitch, dreading the answer.

"There's about a cupboard full. The one next to the sink. In the lab." She shrank away from him. "Sorry."

"It's fine. As it turns out, if we didn't have a shed-load of cee-four from the fake bomb, we'd be using them right about now. But," he said, trying to be serious when he was actually pleased, "no more making black holes without telling me first, okay?"

She looked up as Madeleine climbed out to join them. "Okay."

Madeleine was followed by Tabletop and finally Valentina, trailing a thin two-core cable behind her. She passed the end out to

Petrovitch, then reached back in for her case.

"So: first charge to crack concrete. Have added copper core to slice rebar, but maybe one more after." She handed the case to Tabletop, who held it up to the light while she retrieved the hand-cranked dynamo.

"Should we move?" asked Lucy.

"Is small explosion, little one. Loud, but small."

"She knows what she's doing," assured Petrovitch. He passed Valentina the bare wires, and she attached them to the terminals with an easy dexterity born of familiarity.

"Against wall, please. Will be loose debris, and dust."

When she was ready, and she'd checked everyone was staying where she'd put them, she reached into her jacket pocket for earplugs. She pushed them home with a grunt, then vigorously wound the handle on the cylinder in her hand.

She followed her own advice and stepped back against the damp brickwork. "*Tri, dva, adin.*" Her thumb closed on the button.

A circle of light like a flashbulb imprinted itself against the tunnel wall, and the sound of a thousand hands clapping slammed into the air, making it hard and unyielding. A cloud of brown dust blew outward as if fired from a cannon, and the lights flickered: blinked on, off, then on again, illuminating the inside of the haze and making it glow.

Petrovitch listened for the inevitable rumble and slide of a roof collapse. He waited and waited, and realized he was holding his breath. A year's secret work, and it came down to whether he'd secured the tunnel supports properly. He felt his heart surge, and he let it run.

There was benefit in being able to control parts of his physiology. There was also something to be said for letting him feel human, just once in a while. Terror, anticipation, euphoria even. Being alive was a drug, and he was addicted.

The noises he feared the most never materialized. He heard the sounds of coughing and complaining instead.

Lucy peeled her hands from her ears. "I was expecting, I don't know. More flames."

"I made that mistake once. Tina's an expert: you could learn a lot from her." Petrovitch splashed his way to the gap in the brickwork and peered in.

The dust was settling in a fine hissing rain, making shifting shapes and sheets in the light. Valentina appeared next to him and she cast a critical eye over the scene.

"Hmm. Is okay." She passed the dynamo back to Tabletop and boosted herself up. Her legs wriggled, and she found a handhold to

drag herself over the top.

Once she'd gone to inspect the damage she'd caused, Madeleine thought it safe to speak.

"You never did say what you were going to do with Michael once you'd got him out."

"Didn't I? We're back on plan B anyway. Shame, really. Plan A was brilliant, even if I say so myself." Fine dust was settling on his eyes, and he cried it away. "If Michael's not in a fit state, I don't know what I'm going to do instead. It's taken the NSA months to purge Anarchy from its network; clearly, I'm better than they are, but it'll still take time."

"Sam." She was standing right behind him, pressing into his back. "What were you going to do with Michael?"

Valentina came scrabbling back, a shadow that slowly solidified. "Petrovitch. Come. See."

"Sorry," he said to Madeleine, "it'll have to wait. Shove me up."

She did so with a little more force than was strictly necessary, and he landed in a heap at Valentina's feet.

"*Yobany stos,*" he muttered. "I'm already broken enough."

Valentina crouched low and led the way back to the tunnel face. Where there had been a slick gray wall was now a gaping black maw. When she settled against the last roof prop, she looked uncommonly pleased with herself.

Petrovitch crawled over her legs and moved his left arm so that it supported itself on the lip of the hole.

The cut was sharp on its outer edge, and grew ragged as it worked its way in. Loose rubble clung to the sides and cracks radiated out. The steel mesh that reinforced the concrete had been severed as neatly as if it had been sawn through. The exposed ends of each bar looked like they'd been melted.

"I thought you said you'd need at least two goes at it."

"I am better than I thought."

Petrovitch grinned. The explosion had created a hole that was perfect. "Yeah. Orders of Lenin all round."

"At least, am good for something."

"You're good for lots of things, Tina." He took a fragment of concrete and dropped it over the edge. Being able to time the fall accurately, he calculated that the bottom of the shaft was only three and a half meters down. "Most of all, you're a good friend."

She narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips. "I must say this now."

He was busy peering through the hole, checking to see if there was debris clogging the shaft, and how much they might have to shift before getting to Michael. The air inside was cool blue, uniform but for a faint glimmer of brighter notes in a rectangle set into the wall

down at the level of the concrete floor. He brought his head back through.

"Sorry?"

"Does not matter." She started back up the tunnel, but he caught her sleeve.

"Seriously. I use you like a Swiss Army knife and you ask for nothing except the assurance that it's going to be all right in the end. And even when it looks like it's one big pile of *pizdets,* you still believe in me. So you've earned the right to say whatever you want, and I'm just going to have to shut up and listen."

Valentina turned herself back around as Madeleine shouted down to them: "Everything okay?"

"Fine. It's all fine," replied Petrovitch, and brought his head close to Valentina's. "Talk to me, Tina."

"I would never betray you. You must know this."

"*Yobany stos,* of course I know this."

"I would never do anything that would harm you or Madeleine."

"I know that too."

"I have been tempted. I am still tempted. I will still be tempted: by fantasy of you and me making lots of good little communists together. But know this also—Sonja Oshicora will never live to make you her slave: I will kill her first." She tossed her head back and stared Petrovitch square in the face. "She does not know what love is. We do. Because of this, we will prevail."

He grabbed her, pulled her close, pressed his dusty lips against her ear. "We can all win. We can all still win. I promise."

21

There was rope, because Petrovitch had thought he would need rope, but no flashlights, because he had one in his courier bag which he was never without except for now. That he couldn't remember where it was he last had it troubled him, and he almost delayed everything while he reviewed the last few hours' video capture.

The string of lights from the tunnel could be dangled through the hole though, even if it did plunge everyone else into darkness. Lucy said she didn't mind, as long as she could still touch someone else, and that there weren't any rats.

At the mention of vermin, Madeleine looked at Petrovitch.

"I haven't seen one down here for months," he said. He lifted his T-shirt up and Valentina secured the nylon rope to his back brace. She pulled to make sure of her knot, and he growled. "I know people pay good money for that sort of thing, but I'm not one of them."

"Fall from three meters onto head will kill as quick as fall from thirty." She adjusted his clothing. "Will hold."

Madeleine belayed the rope around her waist and checked the loose coil by her side. She braced her feet either side of the hole. "Okay. Taking the strain."

"This is not how I imagined this happening," complained Petrovitch. He sat between Madeleine's legs and folded his left arm across his chest. Valentina and Tabletop lifted him up and fed him into the hole, bit by bit. First as far as his calves, then his thighs, then he was sitting on the very lip of the shaft. He lay back as best he could, and they turned him so he was face to face with the sandy floor.

His legs dangled over the edge.

As he was eased further in, his whole weight fell on his metal-encased arm. He felt the pressure, and blocked the pain. The rope ran in a taut, quivering line over his shoulder. His body was now pulling him down rather than back, and the ends of the rebar were hard against his skin.

"Slowly." He tried to hang on to the edge of the concrete with his right hand, but he was just fighting against what Madeleine was doing. He surrendered himself to her care, and dangled. All that was left to do was lift his chin so that he didn't scrape it against the rough-hewn stone.

He was suspended in space, between the floor of the shaft and its undefined top. It was easier to look up than down, so he did, letting his head fall back.

He couldn't quite make out what it was he was seeing. In infrared, the image made little sense, and in visible light, it was just a vast dark space. It was only when the lights were threaded through that the situation became clear.

Far above him was a confused choke of girders and concrete. The beams had gouged their way down the walls of the shaft, twisting and bending under the immense pressure from above, before locking solid slantwise from one side to the other. Perhaps the first piece to fall had supported the second, and so on, until the blockage had built up layer on layer.

There were a few fist-sized pieces of foundation on the floor of the shaft: otherwise, it was all held in perfect equilibrium above his head.

"*Chyort,*" he breathed.

Tabletop leaned out over the pit. "You okay?"

Petrovitch put his finger to his lips and pointed upward.

She followed his direction, and stared for a few moments. Then she looked down at him and hissed, "We'll bring you back up."

He shook his head, and she looked up again, just to check she'd seen what she thought she'd seen.

"Really, we're bringing you back up."

He shook his head harder and pointed down. They looked at each other for a while, and he could hear Madeleine's voice rise in pitch as she asked repeatedly what was going on.

Then he started to slide down the face of the wall. Eventually, his questing feet found the floor, and the rope slackened. Tabletop used that slack to go hand-over-hand, her legs wrapping around the nylon to control her descent. It took seconds, and then she was untying him.

"We have to be insane to even attempt this," she said.

"I never said it was going to be easy."

"I'm pretty sure you did." The rope slipped off his exoskeleton and slithered away.

"If Tina's blasting hasn't brought it down, there's no reason to believe anything we do will."

"Then why," said Tabletop, "are we whispering?"

"Because it looks *yebani* scary, that's why. If we're very, very quiet, it might not notice us. Primal memories from the dawn of time: we're nothing but cavemen, really."

"Then let's drag our knuckles over to the door and get through it."

It was a few short steps to the alcove. Inset were blank steel doors, tall and wide enough when both open to wheel the quantum computer out and into the shaft. Petrovitch tried an experimental tug on one of the handles.

“Yeah, that’s locked.”

He looked at the walls on either side of the doors, then at the face of the doors themselves.

“This isn’t looking good,” murmured Tabletop.

“Found it.” He crouched down and gently blew the dust away from the mechanism. A tiny red light showed through the grime, halfway up the right-hand door. “Oh, you have got to be joking.”

“It’s a…”

He scrubbed at it with his sleeve. “… fingerprint scanner. That’s it. That’s the only way in.”

“Shall I go and get Valentina?”

Petrovitch glanced at the great bolus of debris hanging over them. His face twitched. “I’m going to try something first.”

He licked his right index finger to clean it, then dried it carefully on his collar. He puffed again at the tiny glass window on the lock, and grimaced as he pressed his finger to it.

The red light winked off, and a green one glimmered on. Locks and bolts unwound and slid aside, winding back with oiled understatement.

Petrovitch tried the handle again. The door swung open a little way, then grounded itself on some debris underfoot. He kicked it out of the way and scraped his boot along the arc the door had to describe.

“I take it that wasn’t luck,” said Tabletop.

“No. No it wasn’t.” He held the door aside and Tabletop slipped through. He raised his hand to the faces at the tunnel, and followed. He wedged a piece of fallen concrete in the gap to stop the door clicking shut again.

Just in case.

They were in a short corridor, with another set of double doors at the end. The recessed lights stayed dark, and everything was silent and still.

“Okay?” Petrovitch’s clothes rustled as he moved.

“Nervous.”

“Yeah. I know how that goes.” His boots squeaked on the rubber floor as he walked.

The other doors were merely closed, on the premise that if someone had got this far, they were clearly authorized to be there. But there was a resistance to them opening: a positive pressure from inside, forming a seal. He shoved hard, and there was an audible pop of air.

He held the door ajar, took a deep breath and opened it further. The room beyond was utterly black, cold, sterile.

“Touch nothing,” he said. “Stick to the walls, if we can find out

where the *huy* the walls are."

He edged in, feeling his way. Tabletop slipped in after him, and the door whuffed shut. There was something in here that still worked, then, producing that current of air.

He heard the sound of Velcro unfastening, then the tiny screen on Tabletop's forearm bloomed into life. It produced a tiny amount of light, no more than a candle's worth, but in the absence of anything else, its effect was dramatic.

The room was as tall as it was wide: a perfect white cube, at the center of which was another, smaller, perfectly black cube on a raised platform.

"My God, it's full of stars."

"Sorry?"

"Don't worry. Even if you'd seen the film or read the book, they've probably erased your memory of it. Old Man Oshicora had a sense of humor, as well as being a cold-hearted murderer. I suppose the two aren't mutually exclusive." Petrovitch stepped slowly over to the cube, aware of all the dirt he was trailing behind him. He laid his hand on the smooth surface of the quantum computer. "*Dobre den, tovarisch.*"

"You think he's in there?"

"Who do you think reprogrammed the door lock? He survived the collapse of the tower. His life support was still functioning. If I'd been him, I would have cut my power consumption to a minimum, and then just…"

"Just what?"

"I don't know. Go to sleep, maybe. Dream. When Oshicora dreamed, he created the New Machine Jihad. But Michael's not like that. I think his dreams will be something altogether more grand."

"For a whole year?"

"*Chyort.* Even I feel like I could sleep for a year." He bowed his head and let it hang. "I am so very tired. Tired of planning and plotting and worrying and trying to keep it all together for so very long." He patted the computer. "We're almost there. One last push. Come on, let's see if we can't wake Sleeping Beauty."

There were no obvious consoles or interfaces. Everything was neat, clean, almost zen in its simplicity. Oshicora again.

They worked as a pair, Petrovitch feeling his way around the base of the cube, Tabletop behind him, providing illumination. "Where've you hidden it?" They'd gone around all four sides, and were stumped.

"Do you think he made it deliberately difficult?"

"No, which is why I think I'm missing something completely obvious." His fingertips drifted off the horizontal surface and onto the vertical face of the step. There was a lip, very slight, but enough for

him to catch his nails against.

He shook his head and lifted the whole step up to reveal a row of controls and displays. Tabletop rolled her eyes and hunkered down next to Petrovitch to inspect what they'd found.

The screens were all blank. No lights were showing.

"We might be too late," she said.

"No. All this is off because Michael had settled in for the long wait. One little LED might make the difference between having enough watts to keep cool and eventual heat death."

They lifted the other steps, and on the last one, they found a network port. Petrovitch pursed his lips, then reached under his T-shirt for the palmtop taped to his side.

"In the absence of any big button saying 'on,' I'm going to have to go in." He looked up at Tabletop's shadowed face. "I'm going to need your help."

"Unplugging yourself: what's that going to do to you?"

He sat back on his heels. "The last time it rendered me insensible. The time before that, too. I've been dragging this arm around behind me for a day, banging it about and generally mistreating myself, so I kind of figure that it's going to be even worse than that."

"And when you plug into Michael? What if you can't cope without your programs and protocols?" She held her hand out and Petrovitch placed the palmtop into it.

"You're going to have to use your judgment. If it looks like I'm dying, don't disconnect me." The corner of his mouth twitched. "Only do that if I'm actually dead."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. It seems we have a short period of grace before our brains go hypoxic."

"Madeleine should be here," she said.

"And that's the very good reason why she's not." He readied himself, shuffling onto the cold floor and lying on his right side, stretching out along the length of the side of the cube. "She cares too much about me. She needs me to be safe. She needs to protect me from the demons that live without and within. She has decided, for one reason or another, to forgive me for not telling her about Michael and forgive herself for leaving me over it. But she needs to atone for this business with Father John." He closed his eyes. Habit. He could just turn them off.

"You don't think she'd let you do this?"

"Not that. She'd let me do it. Eventually. I know that, she knows that. She even knows that it's for the best. Right now, she's back up in the tunnel, chewing her nails and snapping at Valentina and Lucy. She's fretting over what happens if we find Michael's alive, or if he's

not. I bet she's even thought about whether or not you'll triple-cross us and take this once in a lifetime opportunity to finish both me and Michael."

"I've had the opportunity every day and every night. To do anything I want."

"She knows that too. Most of all, she knows that this is easier for me without her being here, even though it crucifies her." He wasn't comfortable. It didn't matter. "Ready?"

"I'll make it as quick as I can." Tabletop clicked the little retaining clip on the plug and pulled.

For Petrovitch it felt like he was burning. He clenched his teeth and tried to blank the pain. It wasn't going to kill him, no matter how bad it was. He told himself it wouldn't be for long, even though it already felt like forever.

Tabletop reached over and pushed the cable home into the quantum computer's waiting socket.

22

The pain didn't go away, and he had no way of telling Tabletop.

He wasn't in control anymore, if he ever had been. From the moment Madeleine had walked into the staff canteen, that had been it—every decision he'd made since had been logical, reasonable, defendable, and not even wrong. He just hadn't had enough facts to come up with an alternative that would have led anywhere else but plugged, raw and naked, into the computer that had seen the rise and fall of the New Machine Jihad.

He knew it wasn't meant to be this way, and yet there he was, underground, damaged beyond repair, out of battery power, threatened by entombment, nuclear annihilation, and a woman scorned.

Pizdets.

Here was the problem: computers had architecture, had physical memory and chipsets and operating systems. Petrovitch knew his way around those and could make them his bitches, wrestling with their software until he found the exploits that meant they would do his bidding.

This thing he was connected to had nothing he could grasp. Information inside a quantum computer was contained in the energy states of atoms. He had no way of interpreting them or interacting with them. In this basic state, he was beneath Michael's attention, insubstantial and immaterial: a ghost in the machine.

He'd done it once before, though. When the facsimile of Oshicora had collapsed VirtualJapan and erased all the data, he'd managed to remain for a few brief moments, immersed in the vast empty space that remained. If he'd been aware of it then, he could be aware of it now.

Michael had reprogrammed the door to his vault. He would have left some way to get to him. He was smart. He would have thought of this. He would have planned for this very moment.

So he would have allowed for Petrovitch's incompetence, his habit of throwing stuff at a problem until something stuck. He would have even taken into account that Petrovitch's meat body might not have access to the software that controlled the mitigator code, and that the *balvan* might plug himself directly into an open port and hope for the best.

There were instructions in the implant, updateable firmware that was intended for just that purpose. The *nikkeijin* were supposed to do it that way, of course. VirtualJapan ran hot and fast, shoveling a

body's worth of experiences through one thin cable.

Petrovitch had modified that code for working with other machines, other networks. He'd changed it so much it was unrecognizable and completely useless for its original task. What he needed were the factory-fresh settings. A hard reset.

He could do that. He was going to do that. He'd do it now.

Petrovitch finally struggled through his own very private hell and hit the big metaphysical switch.

His eyes opened wide, and Tabletop was leaning over him, her hand on his bare, scrawny chest, feeling the hum of the turbine beneath. She gasped at his sudden movement and she lurched sideways, intending to unplug him from the jet-black cube.

"No. Nonono," he gasped. "It's meant…"

He was under again.

[to be?]

He was held, lifted up, carried, sheltered. The pain became a memory: a savage, enduring memory to be forever burned into his psyche, but at least it had passed.

"*Chyort*. I've found you." The relief came like a wave of cold water.

[I knew you would, Sasha. I knew you would find me because of the way you tried to find Madeleine. She was lost, and you rescued her. I knew you would do the same for me.]

There was no landscape, no city, nothing to see or touch. But the void was not empty. Michael was there, as if he had always been there, dreaming the eons away until someone woke him.

"I'm." He stopped. "I'm sorry it took so long. I've got so much to tell you, so much I need to tell you, but there were… complications."

[Has the world forgiven us?]

"Some have. Some say we're *yebani* heroes, others that you're a god to be worshipped. Many don't have strong feelings one way or the other and are just a little afraid of us, but the ones we're going to have problems with are the ones with the authority to drop a megaton of rubble on us and who think you're Lucifer and I'm Baba Yaga. Getting out of this in one piece isn't going to be straightforward."

[Then we must proceed as you see fit.]

"Yeah, I had it all planned, a way of spiriting you away with no one noticing, but that's not going to happen now. I screwed up. I broke the Freezone network with a virus—and you don't even know what the Freezone is—and I need to get everything back online in order to spring you. But the only way I can do that is by getting you to do the dirty work, and then, of course, our enemies will know you're out."

[Sasha, I place myself in your hands. I trust you.]

"I can't even explain where I've been or what I've been doing." He groaned. "We've got no time. When they brought the tower down, debris got wedged in the access shaft. Anyone decides they want to give it a stir, that'll be it. I might never be able to get to you again. For all kinds of reasons. We're in so much trouble right now, I can't begin to say."

[Sasha, listen to me. We will make time. When all this is over, when I am free and you are free and we have nothing else to do but talk, then that is what we will do. I have things to show you. Wonderful things. I have considered your equations and I have seen some of the implications of what they mean. There are fuller, deeper meanings I have yet to discover, but when I tell you what I have found so far, it will bring you such joy.]

"You're going to survive. Even if I don't."

[We stand or fall together, my love,] said Michael. [You know this to be true.]

Petrovitch was silent, then he regained control of his voice. "Okay, look. I can get a network cable down here: that part is ready. I can find a way of getting you up to a satellite, though I don't have my rat. If you restart the Freezone's system, I promise the next thing we'll do will be designed to keep you safe. I've had to rely on other people for that, so I hope they're ready. They'd better be ready."

[You say we have enemies. Do we have friends?]

"Yeah. We've got friends, but we have to find out who they are first. We're just going to have to run with it and see how far we get. Strengths: everything north of the Thames is the Freezone: I'm sort of the boss now, as of half an hour ago. I've a *govno* load of money and we can use that to secure all sorts of favors. Weaknesses: you're supremely vulnerable to attack because everyone will know just where you are. We've got no comms with anyone, and we're relying on the better part of human nature for anyone to do anything I say. Opportunities: once we've got the local network up and running again, we can migrate you somewhere they'll never find. We'll get a head start on that. And there's a bunch of guys from the Vatican who'd love a word with you. I kind of told them to fuck off before, but I'm coming to see how we can use them.

"As to threats? *Chyort,* where am I going to start? You face UN-sanctioned extermination. The Yanks are going to go ballistic—literally—when they realize you're not buried anymore. They've already got another CIA team on the ground, and up to the point the Freezone lost contact with the outside world, everyone thinks I'm a nuclear terrorist. Sonja Oshicora has gone mad, and that's just a whole different world of pain. This is going to get crazy really quickly, and we're going to have to make stuff up as we go along." He paused.

“When the time comes, are you going to be ready?”

[I have been ready for a long time. Let there be light.]

“See you on the other side, Michael. It won’t be long now. Kick me out.”

And abruptly, he was on his back in a pitch-black room, save for the timorous blue-white shine from a wrist-sized screen. Everything hurt once more.

Tabletop was poised. “Now?”

“Now,” he grunted, and she flicked the connector out of its socket and into the palmtop laying beside them on the ground.

He could block the pain once more, alter the speed of his heart and flood his system with enough adrenaline to get him through the next few minutes.

“Is he alive?” she asked.

“Oh yeah.”

“And is he sane?”

He sat up slowly, feeling five times his true age. “He’s not a drooling idiot, if that’s what you’re asking.” He scrubbed at his stiff hair. “What he wants to do is sit me down and talk physics.”

“That sounds a lot like you.” She retaped the computer to his torso and tugged his T-shirt down. “If that’s a measure of sane, I guess it’ll have to do.”

“He trusted me to get him out. He knew I’d come for him, and I feel a complete *mudak* for taking so long.” Petrovitch looked at her laser-corrected eyes. “I should have told you what I was doing. You wouldn’t have let me down.”

“Or Tina, or Lucy.”

“Amongst all the other things I’ve also fucked up, this has to take the crown jewels for the thing I’ve fucked up the most, right?”

She stood up and dragged him after her. “That remains to be seen. What do we do now?”

“Back to the tunnel. We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

He leaned on her more than not. He was tired; bent, battered, hungry, thirsty, and angry. Mainly angry, and that was what had sapped his energy the most. A good job it was time to get even.

When he was out in the shaft, he called for the spool of network cable near the tunnel entrance to be thrown down to him.

“Don’t, whatever you do, cut it or kink it.” He looked behind him to judge the distance to Michael. “I’d hate to have to try and source another.”

Madeleine wrapped the coil inside a bag and paid out enough spare so that when she launched it into the darkness, it wouldn’t pull.

Petrovitch caught it one-handed and passed the bag to Tabletop. “You know where this end goes. Do not, whatever you do, let a door

close on it. Go."

She ran off into the darkness, and he had to wait for her to return before she could tie him back onto the rope and get himself hauled up again. He had to wait, but there was no good reason why the others had to: he only needed Madeleine.

Lucy's expectant face peered down at him. Perhaps she recognized his predatory expression.

"What do you want me to get?"

"Something with satellite connectivity. Fast processor, fat bandwidth. I need it now, and I need it in the underground car park between our hotel and Hyde Park."

"Something like your rat, you mean?"

"Something exactly like my rat. But now is the highest priority. Steal it if you have to, use force if necessary. Tina?"

"*Da?*"

"Go with her. Don't take no for an answer. *Vrubratsa?*"

"Come, little one. I have an idea," said Valentina, in a way that made Petrovitch feel decidedly uncomfortable—for the people at the other end of her idea. They left, scrambling away, and Tabletop came back.

"Done," she said simply, looking back over her shoulder at the wedged-open door and its tiny green light.

"Thanks. Let's not hang around. The idea of death by crushing is one of my least favorites." He passed her the free end of the rope. "Though to be fair, I'm not exactly a fan of any of them, and I'd like to avoid them all if possible."

Tabletop jerked his T-shirt up to his shoulders and threaded the rope around the metal superstructure. "I'd like to see you try."

He thought she was joking, but she wasn't.

"Seriously. Do you really think you can manage that?"

"I've seen it. I don't know how it works, but yeah, I get to cheat death. *Chyort,* Tabletop. I even get to be old first."

She tugged the rope hard, and he felt every bone left in his body rattle. "He's secure," she called, and the rope went taut. And just to him, she said, "I'll make sure it happens. All of it. You won't be alone, either."

His feet left the ground, and Madeleine hauled him up, his back scraping against the cold concrete of the shaft, until there was an empty space behind him.

Still holding on with one hand, she reached forward with her other and slid her arm across his chest. She dragged him in and he was lying on her, her breath hot against his ear, the tunnel roof close and heavy.

"Hey," she said.

“Hey yourself.”

“How was Michael?”

“I think he’s okay. I think he’s better than okay. I think he’s been busy.”

“And you don’t think he’s going to want vengeance on either those that buried him down here, or those who left it a year before digging him out again?” She felt him stiffen and try to roll off her, but it was child’s play for her to hold him against her for as long as she wanted. “I’m just saying this because we have enough to deal with without another New Machine Jihad. I want you to tell me you’re absolutely certain he’s not going to try any weird robot shit on us, or so help me God, I’ll bite through that network cable with my own teeth. Tell me he didn’t say all the things that would make you trust him, and that you didn’t believe them all without the slightest hint that he has an ulterior motive. Tell me I’m not the only one around here who can see this possibly being the very worst mistake any of us has made today.”

“I’m still here.” called Tabletop. “Any time soon would be good.”

“Come on, Sam,” said Madeleine, “it’s not much to ask. The New Machine Jihad killed tens of thousands by accident. Michael killed a hundred thousand Outies because you told him to. Are you really ready to unleash him on a whole world? After what’s happened?”

Petrovitch didn’t even cross his fingers. “I swear to you that this will work out for the best,” he said. “I trust him like I trust you.”

“That’s what worries me. Look what happened to us.” She gently turned him onto his front and started to unlace the knot at his back. “What’s more important is how much does he trust you? If he starts to doubt either your competence or your motives, we could be back in the Stone Age again in an instant.”

“He trusts me,” he muttered into the ground. “He trusts me like you trust me.”

“Touché.” She coiled the rope around her arm and flung the end of it through the hole, down to where Tabletop was waiting.

23

Petrovitch was pushed out of the second tunnel by Madeleine, and he was back in the underground car park, shrouded by blue plastic. He looped his good hand through the center of the reel of cable and started spooling it out, passing it awkwardly to himself through the gates made by the scaffolding poles.

"Would it be easier if I did that?" Madeleine splashed through the standing water and held the sheeting aside for him.

"Probably," said Petrovitch, "but then I'd feel completely and utterly *yebani* useless, so I'm going to do it anyway."

Rather than turning toward the rusting door set into the concrete wall, he started up the slope to where daylight flooded in, stark and bright after the darkness. The white cable trailed behind him through the mud like a worm. As before, he felt a shiver of fear as he looked at how much cable he had left, and how far he had to walk. He'd measured everything a dozen times, and even now wondered if he'd made a mistake.

The reel grew lighter as he got closer to the outside.

"Are you…?" asked Tabletop.

"*Past' zabej.* I'm not going to run out."

The marks on the plastic reel were turning faster, and the length left was shortening all the time. But he was at the barriers, weaving around them, and blue sky was only a few more steps away. He had hoped that Lucy and Valentina would be there already, waiting for him with some slim piece of technology he could hook up to, but the only thing in evidence was the Al Jazeera news van parked lengthways across the access ramp to the carpark.

"What the *huy* are this lot doing here?" he blurted. He had ten meters of cable left to play with. He'd calculated it right, but his sense of satisfaction shriveled at the thought of journalists getting in the way.

"I'll get rid of them," said Madeleine, and broke into a run.

Tabletop stood next to Petrovitch and finally relieved him of the almost-empty drum. "What exactly did you tell Lucy and Tina to do?"

"Ah, *vsyo govno, krome mochee.*"

His worst fears were confirmed when Madeleine banged on the side of the van with her fist, and the door slid open to reveal Lucy sitting inside, a set of headphones slung around her neck.

"At least that satellite dish should be big enough even for you." Tabletop indicated the top of the van.

"What would really make my day the full *pizdets* would be if Tina

hadn't ordered the journos off at gunpoint and had instead asked them along for the ride."

"You mean like those two?"

A man in an open-necked check shirt appeared from around the back, and a woman in a purple kurta. The man looked unshaven and harassed, a high-definition giro-stabilized camera harnessed to his torso, and enough good sense to keep the lens pointed at the ground. She looked glossy and bright in a way Petrovitch never felt. She strode out to meet him, full of confidence and entitlement.

"*Yebat'-kopat'*."

Madeleine glared at Lucy, who shrugged, and called out to the reporter with weary familiarity. "Surur. What the hell is going on?"

The woman stopped advancing on Petrovitch at the sound of Madeleine's voice and visibly stiffened. "I might ask you the same question, Mrs. Petrovitch. In fact, I'm surprised to see you here at all, in this company."

"We're full of surprises today. In fact, I think I'm all surprised out, so unless you can explain to me what you're doing here—and really quickly—I'm going to start breaking things." Madeleine towered over the other woman in a way that made the cameraman break out in a sweat.

The driver's door slammed, and Valentina strolled around the high hood, slinging her AK nonchalantly over her shoulder.

"Does that clear everything up, Mrs. Petrovitch? Your husband's attack dog told me she was taking my studio, and she didn't care if I came with it or not. I am the accredited press, and I will be objecting to this treatment most strongly."

"Duly noted," said Petrovitch. "Sorry, I don't think we've met, though I've seen you often enough putting difficult questions to my wife."

The reporter looked at Petrovitch, and for the first time looked through the aura of barely contained fury and frustration at the shattered man behind.

"Yasmina Surur, Al Jazeera. I assume you know something about the interruption in the communications network." She held out her hand.

Petrovitch looked at his own. "Maybe, maybe not," he said, wiping his palm against his trouser leg. On the spur of the moment, he decided that if it wasn't going to come clean, he may as well. "Okay, as of an hour ago, everything changed, Miss Surur. So if you want to complain to anyone, complain to us. *Le Freezone, c'est moi.*"

She switched her gaze from Petrovitch to Madeleine to Tabletop, then round at Valentina and Lucy behind her. They were all familiar sights to her, but it wasn't just Petrovitch she was looking at in a new

light.

"Doctor Petrovitch, can I have an interview?"

"Yeah. If you must. There's a couple of things we have to do first, so I'd appreciate it if you just got the *huy* out of our way while we do it. If you want to film, go ahead, but don't talk to us, and you're not broadcasting anything until I say so. *Vrubatsa?*"

She'd heard him often enough to know what he meant. She nodded and urged her colleague to start recording.

Petrovitch turned his back on the pair and beckoned Valentina over.

"*Yobany stos,* woman. This is such a bad idea I don't know where to begin."

"Hmm. You ask for fast, for big bandwidth, and here is fast and bandwidth bigger than Moon." She narrowed her eyes. "You are in charge now. You need to stamp authority on Freezone. Your people need to see you, world needs to see you. Make good impression, make right impression, *da?*"

"Yeah. In Russia, impression makes you." He groaned. "Right, let's make the best of this. Tabletop, get that cable plugged in and find me a satellite. Lucy, stop mucking around and… just stop twirling on that *yebani* seat. No, I need to make sure that Mickey and Minnie out there don't try and pull a fast one on me: monitor everything that goes to that dish. If they start to send a second too early, kill the feed. Tina? Really, what the *huy* were you thinking? Make sure no one else films us. If the CIA get wind of what we're doing before we're finished, we're really finished."

"And what do I do?" asked Madeleine, upset at being left until last.

"You get to do the most important job of all. Go and tell His Excellency I'm ready to deal. He and his bunch of sky pilots get uninterrupted access to Michael for the next hour or two—but I want a definitive decision on his animus, or whatever the *huy* they want to call it, after that. No weasel words, no recommendations pending on the Holy Father's prayerful deliberations. They go public with whatever they decide by, what, three o'clock. Final offer, no negotiation." He scratched the bridge of his nose. "And if they even think about ratting me out, tell them I have enough cee-four to put them all in orbit and every reason to want to do so."

She put her hands on her hips and he knew she was going to argue with him. So he pre-empted it, jabbing his finger up in her face.

"This—this is your idea. You want to make sure that Michael isn't plotting humanity's downfall? Who better to find out than a bunch of Jesuits trained to do nothing but pick holes in the most carefully crafted story. I'm not going to try to influence them one way or

another: you're going to have to leave them to it too. Okay?"

"Why are you doing this?" Madeleine kicked her heel against the road and stood her ground. "You think he might be rogue?"

"No. No, I don't. But because I love you and I know you have my best interests at heart, I'm agreeing to something that I don't want to do, only because you want me to do it. I kind of figured that was what we promised when we made all those vows in front of that lying shit of a priest."

She stared down at him. "Sam…"

"Yeah, I know. The first fuck in a year and I fold like a pack of cards."

Then she hit him, as gently as she could manage, cuffing him around the ear before dragging him into her embrace and lifting him off the ground.

"*Chyort,* put me down while I've still got some ribs in one piece."

She did. "You're impossible."

"No. Just highly improbable, but no one ever said it was easy being married to a statistical outlier." He straightened the metalwork surrounding his arm. "Go. Tell them we go live in a matter of minutes."

Tabletop called from inside the van. "Sam, we've got him."

Petrovitch glanced back around, and watched Madeleine's leather-clad body running up Park Lane.

"Sam?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm listening."

"Sam!"

He finally turned his attention to Lucy's console, where a familiar face was peering out at them, then to the series of empty power sockets screwed to the bulkhead next to her. "If you can find the right adaptor, I'll have some of that."

"Your courier bag's still in the car," said Lucy, sliding the headphones from her neck and onto her chair.

"Thank you." He took her place and pressed one of the cans against his ear.

[I have linked with a satellite], said Michael, [and am beginning to access the Freezone network.]

"Good work." Petrovitch maneuvered the lip mic to somewhere approaching close. "Bring it all back online, then we can pick and choose which bits to shut back down."

[The virus you activated: not bad, for a human.] The face on the screen lowered, as if bowing.

"I had help. Even though the poor kid ended up in the slammer, he still thinks it was worth it." He took the courier bag from a breathless Lucy, and pulled out a nest of wires. "*Huy,* I don't know."

[We have power, even though the virus is trying to re-migrate back into the nodes I have cleared. Holding it at bay is requiring considerable resources.]

"Yeah, it does that. It makes it very effective if you don't quarantine the clean system from the infected. Just strip it out: we won't need it again. There'll be isolated machines that'll come on later, and they'll still carry the virus, but I'm figuring you can inoculate the live network against that."

[It will take some time. As I said, not bad for a human.]

He had the first tickle from the palmtop strapped to his side: it had found a signal.

"Result."

Between them, Lucy and Tabletop had disentangled the power adaptors from each other. One went in on his left, into his computer, and one on the right, into the batteries.

[We have control.] Michael seemed to turn away briefly before staring back out at Petrovitch. [We also have several problems that require urgent attention.]

"No shit, Sherlock." He could move his left arm again, and he was happy. "Tell me what Sonja Oshicora's mob are doing."

[The picture is hard to establish. One moment.] Michael paused, listening, seeing, tracking. [They have mostly regrouped at the Telecom Tower. Now they are able to communicate with distant units, there may be coordinated action.]

"Some of those won't be following Sonja's orders anymore, and after I've had my say, all she'll be left with is a hard core of Oshicora idealists."

[Sasha, why did she turn on you? I had every indication that she would do almost anything for you, and you only had to ask. People are unreliable and inconstant.] Michael made himself blink. [Except for you.]

"Yeah, that's me. Consistent to the point of predictable. And that's exactly the exploit Sonja used. I'm going to talk to her now, and see what she has to say for herself."

Petrovitch knew her mobile number. He could tell where the phone was by chasing it across the network until he'd pin-pointed the location, on the ground floor of the tower. She wasn't alone: the area was thick with signals and other traffic, calls coming in and out at a furious rate. He could hear her, shouting orders with a voice that rang with rising panic. He could have interrupted her conversation at any time by hijacking the handset, but he noticed that she had another phone on her, live but dormant.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the phone that had been wired to the bomb. There'd been only one number in the call

history. He took the headphones off and sat back in the chair, holding the phone to his ear.

Sonja stopped talking. The sound of muffled ringing came over the open connection. The call timed out when she didn't answer, but he was absolutely certain he had her attention.

He dialed again. The call was picked up, and he could hear the sound of chaos in the background. Close up was the trembling of her breath.

"Hello, Sonja."

"Sam. I can explain."

"You don't need to. The mere fact I've reached you on this number is pretty much all the explanation I can stomach at the moment. I trusted you, and you betrayed me. More than that, though. You abused your position of authority and used resources meant for building up the Freezone to bring it to its knees. So let's forget what you tried to do to me and Maddy for a moment, and concentrate on that." He took a deep breath, and adjusted his grip on the phone which was threatening to slip out from between his sweat-slicked fingers.

"Please…"

He lost it. He was standing, shouting down the phone, oblivious to everything else. "*Past' zabej, suka derganaya.* Do you know what you've done? The whole of civilization is hanging by a *yebani* thread and you're hacking at it with a pair of rusty scissors. So you just shut up and listen to me. You are relieved of your duties. You are under arrest. You will surrender all weapons and you will place your private army under the control of the interim Freezone authority, which just happens to be me. You will stay in your tower until someone comes to read you your rights and put you in front of a court. Which is a *huy* sight more mercy than the idiot followers of the New Machine Jihad ever got. You are now irrelevant to the running of the Freezone. No one will follow your orders. You have no right to act on behalf of or represent the Freezone in any matter. You are deposed, Madam ex-President."

At that moment, the first pile-driver started off in Hyde Park, filling the air with its rhythmic thump. It sounded like victory.

"Hear that? That's what we think of your state of emergency. The Freezone is back at work, and there is nothing you can do to stop it. The future's coming through, Sonja, and you're not on board."

He stabbed his thumb down on the phone, and held the device in his hand, looking for somewhere to throw it. Cool fingers curled over his.

"Sam," said Lucy, "evidence?"

"*Do pizdy.* If she was here, I'd shove it up her *zhopu.*" He let her

take it, though, and picked up the headphones again. “Michael, shut Sonja down. Her whole operation. I’ll talk to them in a minute when I’ve calmed down.”

He closed his eyes.

[Done. What next?]

“Hanratty. I need to talk to Hanratty.”

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Petrovitch had memorized the number a long time ago, and had never called it. He'd never needed to. He kept his promises, and if Hanratty couldn't, then Hanratty would be history.

A token of their agreement had arrived by courier: it had told Petrovitch that all was well and as it should be. That, though, had been two days ago, and he couldn't be certain of anything anymore, least of all the reception he'd get from Hanratty. He steeled himself as he placed the call. Either Hanratty would answer and everything would be ready, or he would be ignored and he'd be left to scrabble a last-minute plan together out of the tatters of earlier, better ones.

He'd barely pushed the last digit into the line before the connection was made.

"What the bloody hell is going on?" Hanratty's comb-over was flapping in a Spanish breeze. He looked like he hadn't slept for two days, and he'd probably been drinking the whole time.

"We're going early, Mr. Hanratty. That's what's going on."

"Christ on a bike, man. The last news we had out of the Freezone is that you've got your own nuke and you're threatening to set it off: I need more explanation than 'early.' "

"Al Jazeera is interviewing me in five minutes. It's going out live, and it'll answer all the questions you and your colleagues have. Now shut up and listen, because I've had a piss-awful day and it's not over yet. I received your package. Are you ready to receive mine?"

Hanratty tried to calm his hair, but his face was still ruddy. He looked like a Galway farmer—unsurprising, since that was what he had been once, thirty years ago.

"I'm not sure I'm ready to do this, Petrovitch. Before, it looked like a good idea. Now, I don't know."

"Do you want your *yebani* country back or not?" Petrovitch's avatar leaned forward, growing on Hanratty's screen until he filled it edge to edge. "Or do you want to leave it a byword for a contaminated wasteland and let it fade from memory like Japan surely will?"

"You know I do. You know I've staked everything on this. I just don't know whether you're the right man anymore."

"I appreciate that you've got last-minute jitters, but everything is as it was before. I'm the same person you made that deal with six months ago, Hanratty. You knew who I was then, warts and all."

"Ah, Jesus. I don't like the changes, Petrovitch. I don't like them at all."

“I’ve got enough money just to buy you out. You know that, don’t you? I’ve got billions in the bank I can use to lever billions more, and you’ve lost your precious land. Tell me what the point is of being Taoiseach in name only, leading a people who can never go home?”

“Ah, c’mon.” And Petrovitch knew that Hanratty was just bluster now, even though at that moment he needed Hanratty far more than Hanratty needed him. The trick was not to show fear.

“I don’t want to keep Ireland permanently, but I’ll keep it out of your reach for as long as your grandkids live.” He paused for effect. “Tell me you’re ready and we’ll do it.”

Hanratty gritted his teeth. “We’re ready.”

“Show me the address.”

Hanratty held up a scrap of paper: a bill for tapas going one way, and eight groups of four characters separated from each other by a colon. “I have no idea what the hell this means.”

Petrovitch captured the image and reviewed it so he knew he could reread the code. “Eat it.”

Hanratty reluctantly pushed the paper into his mouth, chewed for a bit, then upended a bottle of golden beer between his lips. He didn’t come up for air until there was nothing but the last cascades of foam clinging to the inside of the glass. He burped roundly behind his fist. “Now I suppose you want me to release what’s in the diplomatic bag, don’t you?”

“I could hack it. I’ve got a friendly AI who’s very good at that. But I’d rather you were completely entangled in our sordid little affair.”

Hanratty pulled a keyboard toward him and started pecking out keys using one finger and with his tongue caught at the corner of his mouth. “There. And may God have mercy on our souls.”

“Your confidence in me knows no bounds, Hanratty. But congratulations: you just bought yourself and everyone you represent a stake in the future. I’ll be in touch.”

He cut the connection, and immediately sent Michael the screen-captured code.

[An IP address.]

“Go. It’s a quantum computer. A gift from the Irish government. Get yourself out of that *yebani* tomb and tell me when you’ve done it. We have bandwidth to spare, so don’t hold back.” Petrovitch delved into his courier bag for the diplomatic pouch at the very bottom.

The lock had sprung on the envelope-sized bag, and he shook the contents out into his hand: a series of plastic cards, all with different photographs holographed on.

Lucy was the closest, sitting behind him, watching the monitors that showed other news networks.

“This is yours. Don’t lose it.” Petrovitch shuffled the cards until he

found Lucy's unsmiling face.

"What, what is this? And where did you find that picture?" She looked at the card, and turned it to every angle.

"It's your new passport. If you've noticed, it means that not only are you a citizen of the Irish Republic, but you're also a diplomatic agent as defined by the Vienna Convention. It grants you immunity from prosecution for pretty much everything, though you can be expelled from the host country." He shuffled the cards again. "So try and keep your nose clean, or I'll kick you out."

She looked at him, then at the laminated card in her hands, then at the stack of similar plastic rectangles trapped between Petrovitch's dirty fingers.

"There's one for everyone."

"Yeah." He turned the cards so they faced him. He found his own, and barely recognized his picture. "I said I'd take care of you. And Tabletop, and Tina, and look, here's Maddy's. And this, this would have been Sonja's. But I don't think we'll be needing that anymore."

It was hard to destroy, but eventually his manic folding backward and forward along the same line over and over again yielded the start of a fracture line. He tore the card in two and flicked the pieces out into the road.

The effort had left him breathless.

"Feel better?" asked Lucy.

"*Chyort,* yeah." He handed the remaining cards to her. "Pass these around. I need to get ready for my fifteen minutes of fame."

"Sure." She hopped off her chair and squeezed past him. "Sam. What does it mean, though? Why Irish? Why not, I don't know, Finland?"

"Because the Irish government in exile have asked me to set up a Freezone over there, try and clean up enough of it that people are going to want to move back. And rather than do it all on my own, I thought I could do with a bit of company." He smiled at her. "You're all invited. It'll be a bit like here, but with less city and more rain. We're working on a longer timescale, too."

Lucy jumped to the ground. "How long?"

"A hundred years."

"That's…"

"It'll do. Barely any time at all, really, to do everything I want to." It was all starting to catch up with him. He'd stopped, and it wasn't just his batteries that were drained. "Lucy, I'm tired of this. Tired of trying to fix things that shouldn't be broken in the first place. I want to make something new that doesn't have to be squeezed into an earlier pattern."

"Somewhere you can get breakfast without getting shot at."

“Damn right. That’s going to be the first clause in the constitution. No gunplay without a full fry-up.” He snorted. “Frying pans, not fragmentation grenades. Preach it, sister.”

She moved closer, reached her arms up and around him. “Thanks, Dad.”

He pushed her away, “Go. Go now, before I embarrass myself in front of a global audience.”

She trotted off toward Tabletop, brandishing the passports, and he turned back to the screen in front of him, catching sight of his reflection in the momentarily blank surface.

He looked like crap, and no amount of stage make-up was going to cover it.

[I have transferred myself to the new location. Thank you.]

“My first and last thought every day were for you. I let you down and wanted to make up for that. You’re safe for the moment, at any rate. But look, I want to try something different now: there’s a bunch of guys from the Vatican who’d love to have a word with you. If we want to stop running and start living, you’re going to need to convince them that you’re not just intelligent, capable of creative independent thought and have a unique personality. You need to convince them that you’re alive.”

[Alive. As in meat-alive?]

“As in ensouled. Their primary goal is to establish whether you’re a secondary creation—just a smart machine that can emulate life—or a primary creation. One that has been animated by the very breath of God.”

[That is a very metaphysical distinction, Sasha, which has no practical purpose.]

“Yeah, you’d think so, wouldn’t you? In my new republic, you’ll be accorded all the rights and responsibilities any citizen would have. For other, unenlightened nations, a ruling from a bunch of cardinals that happen to speak on behalf of around a third of the planet will come in very handy. Especially when it comes to overturning a couple of UN resolutions. If you’re alive, they can’t kill you.”

[I understand. What if I fail?]

“I’m getting perilously short of Plan Bs. All I can say is don’t screw up.” Petrovitch called up Madeleine. “Hey.”

“I’m here. Sam…”

“Yeah, if their Eminences aren’t going for this, then I’m going to come down there myself and kick some serious arse.”

“That’s not… it’ll keep. The Congregation are all here. They’ve agreed to your proposal. They want to reserve the right to make an interim ruling; definitive but not necessarily permanent.”

“Not happy, but I’ll take it. What I really want is my tanks parked

on the moral high ground. We can shell the opposition once they're up there. Have they got a computer? One I haven't wrecked?"

"They all have palmtops, Sam. You're not talking about a bunch of dinosaurs here."

"We're going to have to disagree on something. It may as well be that. Tell them to hold." He switched his attention. "Michael: showtime. Geolocate the signals at the Jesuit mission on Mount Street. Give them your undivided attention and remember, this is your interview for entrance into the human race. Good luck."

[No pressure, then.]

"Hah."

He felt the AI's presence dwindle to a pinpoint. He knew that, in the future, the record of Michael's conversation with the cardinals would become an historical document of infinite worth. For good or ill. And it was entirely out of his hands.

"Doctor Petrovitch?"

It just wasn't getting any better. "Hello, Miss Surur."

"Are you ready?" she asked, anxious in case he found something else that might take precedence.

He looked at the passport in his hand, and covered it with his palm before slipping it back into his courier bag. "No, no I'm not. But I suppose we ought to get on with it."

Petrovitch raised his head. The reporter looked impossibly bright. Now that; that was a skill he didn't have. Whatever he was feeling, he showed.

"How do you want to do this?"

"Unedited. I want you to broadcast everything. No commercial breaks, no studio commentary. Station ident and a scrolling translation if you need it, but you're not voicing me over. We both reserve the right to end the transmission when we feel like it. I'll answer any question you want. I can't promise I won't lie to you. I can monitor your output myself, and I'm aware you sometimes make different versions of the same program, depending on your intended audience. I want this to be the same wherever you broadcast—at least the first time. Think you can manage that?" He spun in his chair, then back the other way so as not to tangle his cables.

"I'll have to talk to my manager. If I can have my satellite feed back, that is." She looked down at the trailing cable snaking all the way back to the car park. "I'm assuming that's what I think it is."

"Why don't you save the questions for the interview? I'll be more spontaneous." Petrovitch cleared the mobile studio's computers of the memory of the last quarter hour, and rebooted them all.

"Can you at least try and not swear?" Surur reattached her earpiece from where it dangled around her neck. "Your use of colorful

language will more than likely get us taken off the air by local regulators, and there'll be nothing either of us can do about that."

Petrovitch flashed her a lupine grin. "You'd be surprised at what I can do these days. But okay, I wouldn't want anyone's burka spontaneously catching fire because of something I've said."

She reached behind her for the radio transmitter tucked in her waistband. She played with the controls and, on finding the channel she wanted, put her hand over her mouth mic.

"Doctor Petrovitch? The Freezone is not a high-profile posting, and I'm just a village girl from outside Karachi. There are better interviewers than me, a lot more experienced who would kill for the chance to talk to you for five minutes. This is the biggest thing I've ever done. Please…" She pressed both her hands together in supplication.

Before she turned away to talk to whoever made decisions in her organization, he nodded his acquiescence. The cameraman raised his video rig in preparation, framing his shot of Petrovitch slumped in the doorway of the van, bleeding electricity from the fuel cells, wires coiling around him.

He looked up. Lucy was between Tabletop and Valentina, standing together in a huddle a little way off. He had to quickly stare back down at the ground again. They reminded him of how much responsibility he now had, not just to them, but to everyone.

He felt sick with dread.

25

“Okay.”

They were live. Sound and vision were digitized, compressed, and beamed up to geostationary orbit, thirty-six thousand kilometers away: trivial, really. All the cool kids could do it.

Surur had peeled off the veneer of utter professionalism only briefly. That she could paste it down again so that the joins didn’t show warned Petrovitch that he was going to find the whole episode a genuinely horrible experience.

“This is Yasmina Surur reporting live from the Freezone with an exclusive Al Jazeera interview with Doctor Samuil Petrovitch.”

He watched it play in his head. He was taking two feeds: one from Europe, one from Indonesia. There was a slight time delay between them, a lag that was inherent in the system, but the time codes were the same. No one was interfering with the broadcast so far.

The frame was centered on her, then it started to slide until it was all him. He started to shrink away, then remembered he’d agreed to do this—that Valentina had told him that he had to do it, to present himself as continuity, as the safe pair of hands to steer the Freezone home.

Pizdets.

“Doctor Petrovitch, who’s in control of the Freezone?”

She was, to be fair, getting straight to the point. He didn’t know whether to look at her, or the black hole of the camera lens. He found after a few moments of trying that he couldn’t focus on the camera, that his eyes flickered as they tried to see through the glass to the substrate below. He blinked slowly and turned his head to face Surur.

“I am.” He felt he should apologize, so he did. “Sorry.”

“For the past year, you’ve always been determined to stay outside the Freezone executive. And now with less than two weeks of the mandate left to go, you seize power. Why is that?”

“Yeah, about that. It’s less deliberate than you think. Monday morning was a different world to Wednesday afternoon.” He used his exoskeletal arm to demonstrate the point, scratching the bridge of his nose with one of the pylons protruding from his wrist. “I didn’t ask for this. I didn’t want it. I still don’t. But the Freezone is important, Miss Surur. Too important to sit back and watch it fail.”

“Why was it in danger of failing, Doctor Petrovitch?”

“This,” he said, and stopped. “This is complicated. I’m sure some of the people watching will know what it’s like when those who have power—political, bureaucratic, financial, military, cultural, whatever

—use it to get what they want, over the lives and sometimes the bodies of those who stand in their way. I was…" He stopped again, overly conscious of the millions who were logging in. He could feel the surge in traffic, and wondered if the television station's servers would cope with the strain.

"You were what, Doctor Petrovitch?"

"I was conned. Scammed. Tricked. Fooled. Played. Whichever word you want to use. Set up. And the person who set me up was Sonja Oshicora."

Would she see this, he wondered? Michael had disabled her comms; phones, computers, everything; but there was still a chance she'd managed to log on anonymously.

"Sonja Oshicora, the Freezone president. You count her as a personal friend."

"I did, didn't I?" He scratched at his face again. "I won't be making that mistake again. A relationship tends to die when they frame you as a nuclear terrorist then try and have you arrested."

"Container Zero? The Armageddonist's bomb?"

"Never happened. Sorry, that's confusing as an answer. It was made to look that way. God only knows where they got the body from; for all I know they'd been pulling out desiccated mummies from the lower tiers of Regent's Park for months. You say 'Container Zero' to anyone who lived through Armageddon, and they have an instant picture of what it looks like. The wrecking crew didn't question its veracity. My wife didn't. I didn't. Everyone who saw it, believed. Except none of it was true. Even this," and he brandished his left arm. "I thought I was lucky not to have my head smashed open. I was almost grateful I'd only been crippled. All done for effect, just to make it look more real."

"Can you prove any of this?"

"Yeah. We got hold of the bomb. Eventually. We got to it before the CIA did—in your face, Mackensie—and before the New Machine Jihad could drive it into the central Freezone. We opened it up, and it was packed with high explosives, but no fissile material at all. This phone," he said, fishing around in his pocket. It wasn't there. A moment of panic followed before he remembered Lucy had taken it. He waved her over and held out his hand, "This phone was the trigger. When I did a last number redial, Sonja Oshicora picked up."

The reporter did a series of rapid eyeblinks.

"Go on," said Petrovitch, "ask me what she said."

"What did she say?"

"She said, 'I can explain.' I didn't give her a chance to explain. I kind of, well: in the circumstances, getting a bit shouty was probably understandable. Tell you what, when you're done with me, why don't

you drive over to the Telecom Tower and ask her yourself?"

"I…" Surur struggled to maintain her composure. "The CIA?"

"They attacked the New Machine Jihad at a school up in Hendon, I think. We were there a few minutes ahead of them, trying to locate the bomb. Three agents; killed two, left one injured. Maybe thirty or forty unarmed Jihadis killed before we stopped the slaughter. I did call for help, but we were kind of busy chasing after a van heading this way. Which is why we couldn't stick around."

"How did you know they were CIA?"

"Look: point the *yebani* camera over there. That way." He pointed to Tabletop and Valentina. "The woman on the left is ex-CIA, wearing a CIA stealth suit which comes with the secret CIA decoder ring built in. Her suit lit up like a Christmas tree and in walked three people wearing exactly the same outfits, shooting everything with a pulse. Send someone up to the school. Check the emergency logs. I wish I was yanking your chain, but no: I'm afraid not."

Surur took several breaths; noisy, thready ones that had to come out over her own open mic. In contrast, Petrovitch was actually beginning to enjoy himself. When the camera had swung back around to face him, he felt he had its measure.

"What are your plans for the Freezone now, Doctor Petrovitch?"

"Plans? Hand it over, on time, on budget, to the Metrozone authority. Whether I'll be allowed to do that is up to other people. All those workers you can hear, and thousands more you can't—the ones who are defying this bogus state of emergency and putting in a hard day's labor? They want what I want. I'm going to try and make sure they have everything they need to do their jobs. That's it. That's what I hope will happen. When the Freezone disappears a week on Saturday, it'll become someone else's problem and they'll be welcome to it." He fixed the camera with a stare, stabilized his eyes and beckoned ever so slightly. The man with the video rig actually stepped closer, mesmerized. "I don't want trouble. I don't want a fight. I know we have the CIA in town, and I'd like to make a personal request to President Mackensie. Call. Them. Off. Stand them down. There's too much at stake to have my lot and your lot running around, shooting at each other. And no missiles this time, either. It won't do you any good. We learned, and we're prepared. *Vrubatsa?*"

Unlike with Sonja, he knew Mackensie was watching. Probably in his Situation Room, surrounded by Reconstructionist hawks all suggesting different levels of tactical strikes, as if partial destruction of the Freezone was going to be less of a cause of war than just nuking everything from orbit.

"Can we discuss the artificial intelligence you call Michael?"

Petrovitch twitched in irritation. "I call him Michael because

that's the name he chose for himself. What about him?"

"Have you reconnected Michael to the global communications network?"

"Yeah."

"Despite the UN resolutions?"

"Which are both illegal and immoral. Michael had no chance to speak to the Security Council before it came to its conclusion—which was by no means unanimous. Besides, the UN doesn't have the authority to call for what amounts to the death penalty. I appreciate that there are no rules on how we deal with non-human intelligences, but I'm pretty certain that if we could sit around a table and talk rationally about it, we could come up with something just a bit more humane." He shifted himself in his seat, then got up. His leg had gone mostly to sleep, and he hung out of the van's door while trying to massage life back into it. "We give more rights to a brain-dead crash victim. That's not to argue that we should take away the rights they have, but that we should extend them to something that is demonstrably a unique person."

Surur considered her next question carefully. "Do you think Michael is a threat?"

"To who?" Petrovitch shot back.

"To… us."

He got down off the van, and sat in the doorway, his leg outstretched in front of him.

"Look at it this way: in around ten minutes, we could be hit by ballistic missiles fired from the continental United States. Less if they've a sub in range. Michael is not watching for that. He's spending his time talking to a delegation sent by the Pope, trying to find out if he is only the sum of his parts, merely a fancy computer program with delusions of grandeur, or whether he could be considered to be alive." He grimaced as the pins and needles started to subside. "Imagine you've been buried underground for a year, cut off completely from the outside world, and left there to rot. When you finally get out, you're told that it's been the fault of a whole bunch of powerful people, either because they actively want you dead, or because they're too spineless to stand up on your behalf. What is it that you're going to want to do?"

"Is that a rhetorical question?"

"Of course it is, but we have an audience measured in the tens of millions and I'm kind of hoping some of them are thinking hard about the answer. I know what my first reaction would be. That's because I'm a very bad man who has poor impulse control and a moral compass that's lost its needle. Revenge, that's what I'm talking about. If I was a seriously pissed-off AI, I could cause all sorts of trouble, and

yeah, maybe you'd get me in the end but that wouldn't be before I'd delivered a whole world of pain fresh to the doorsteps of the great and the good. What is it that Michael is actually doing?"

"He's talking to a Papal delegation?"

"He's talking to a Papal delegation. He's so furious with everyone, he's such a *yebani* threat, he's discussing theology with a bunch of Jesuit priests. By the way, if any imams want to get in on the act, give me a call. Or if you're the Dalai Lama. I don't exactly have any staff at the moment, so I can't guarantee I'll get straight back to you, but I'll do what I can." He shrugged. "To conclude: no, he's not a threat."

"What are you going to do now, Doctor Petrovitch?"

He leaned his head against the side of the door. "Sorry, what?"

Surur repeated the question, and he frowned.

"I'm tired, hungry, I've got half a ton of metalwork hanging off me. I've been shot at repeatedly, I've been run all over town, I've defused a big fu… a big bomb, I've led a popular uprising against a corrupt government and I've freed my friend from his prison. What I'd like to do now is have something to eat, preferably involving bacon—not a popular choice, I know—and a lake of black coffee. I'd make sure that no one was going to come and kill us all, then I'd go to sleep until morning. Frankly, I've had enough of today, Miss Surur."

"You won't get the chance to do that, though, will you?"

"I won't get much of a chance to do anything. I'm here for a week, that's all. The Freezone is designed to pretty much run itself. I'm happy for that to happen. I'd ask all our contractors and suppliers to do whatever it is they're supposed to do, without taking advantage of the situation to squeeze a few extra euros out of the budget. I'll come down hard on that. If you've got any problems, I'll try and sort them out, though you'd probably prefer it if I didn't. Feel free to find a solution yourselves."

"What will you do about Sonja Oshicora?"

"Do I have to do anything? No one's taking her orders. She doesn't have the authority anymore to propose, vote on or sign anything on behalf of the Freezone. She can sit in her tower and paint herself purple for all I care. Sure, I might get around to throwing her sorry arse out onto the street at some point, but I've got better things to do, and so have the people who make up the Freezone. Perhaps I should just leave her up there and let the Metrozone deal with her. After all, it's their contracts she was trying to screw with."

"Doctor Petrovitch, the one thing you do seem reluctant to say is why you think your former friend turned against you. You must have an opinion on that."

"I'm reluctant because I'm embarrassed. No one wants their private life dragged out into the open; no one who's sane, anyway.

Sonja always wanted to be more than a friend, and I'm as married as you can get. You're a smart woman, Miss Surur. Go figure it out yourself."

Then there was the sound of distant gunfire, echoing across the rooftops. It would have been easy to mistake it for something else, unless those hearing it hadn't already been intimately acquainted with it.

Petrovitch stood up sharply. "*Chyort.* Where's that coming from?"

Surur's head turned to look down Piccadilly, but the way the echoes worked, it could be almost anywhere.

"Sorry. I'm needed." He grabbed his bag, and started to run to where Lucy and Tabletop were standing, Valentina already going to get the car. The cables that attached him to the van stretched, and with a little more effort, broke. He trailed the ends behind him.

He glanced around, and the camera was still tracking him. "Michael? I'm interrupting. There's small arms fire and I can't tell where."

[One moment.] That moment stretched to breaking point. Valentina screeched the tires of the car, and the three of them piled in, Petrovitch in the front, the other two behind. He pulled out his automatic and checked the magazine. He hadn't reloaded since the school.

"Michael?"

[Regent's Park. There is a confrontation between Oshicora Corporation staff and the demolition crews. The situation is unclear, but there are reports of casualties.]

"*Yebany v'rot.* There's no need for this. No need at all." He slammed his hand down on the plastic fascia. "Container Zero. Go."

26

It was almost like the first time, the ride through the dark on the back of Madeleine's motorbike, nearly dying on every corner because they were taking it too fast. Valentina made the heavy four-wheel-drive vehicle turn so hard the passengers waited for the inevitable roll and splintering of glass with rictus grins, but disaster never came.

They pulled up outside Regent's Park, and the blue haze of smoke from the tires hadn't started to drift before she was out, AK loaded and the safety off.

"I think I'm going to be sick," said Lucy.

Petrovitch couldn't find the seat belt release at first, despite repeatedly stabbing at where he thought it should be. Finally he hit it and fell out into the road, disorientated and not a little nauseous himself.

"*Chyort.*" He looked up from his hands-and-knees position and saw a crowd of dirty-overalled workers on either side of the entrance to the site, taking cover behind wood panels, empty skips, flat-bed trucks and anything else that might provide shelter.

Most of them seemed to have already escaped, though more came darting out between the remaining domiks, running from one container wall to the next until they could join their colleagues.

Valentina dragged him up, and he staggered to the left. He kept going until he banged up against the chain-link fence that surrounded the park.

"Will someone tell me what the *huy* is going on?"

A man, crouched by the gate, pushed his hard hat up and said, "You bullet proof?"

"Not the last time I looked."

"Then get down here with me."

There was an uneasy silence: no shots since he'd arrived, but maybe the sound of voices in the distance, shouting to each other. It was difficult to tell.

"What happened?" Petrovitch lowered himself down to the man's level.

"We went to work, like you said." The man sounded Spanish, like his old research student, or Portuguese. "I was over by the crusher—my job to drop the containers in—when I see Oshicora men. I know it means trouble straightaway, because we're listening to your broadcast, all of us by then. They all got guns, and we got just our hands, but we take no shit from them. We tell them to *vamos!,* that they have no right to be here. We start to push them out: there are

eight of them, but eighty of us."

"Don't tell me, they started shooting you."

"Man, it was like… we ran. They killed a guy, right in front of me." The man put his hand on the front of his shirt, and showed Petrovitch his palm. It was speckled with still-wet blood.

"Yeah, I know what that's like, too." He straightened up. "Eight, right?"

"Maybe nine."

"It's kind of important." He raised his voice. "Eight or nine, people? I need to know."

On a hurried show of hands, the consensus was eight. He wasn't taking it as gospel. By now, Lucy was out of the car, leaning up against a dumper truck tire as tall as she was. Tabletop was staring into what was left of the domik pile, trying to remember the lay of the land.

"We can do better than this," said Petrovitch. "Michael? Interrupting again. I need an up-to-date aerial map of Regent's Park, and I'd like to speak to the Oshicora squad inside."

[If you wait two minutes, a U.S. imint satellite will be in range. I can decrypt the feed for you in real-time. Also, there are nine blocked mobile phone transmitters within Regent's Park, concentrated in one location.]

Michael pushed the identities of the signals over to him, and Petrovitch called them all.

"Hi. My name's Samuil Petrovitch, and I now run this show. If someone wants to own up to being in charge, speak now, because what you say will have a dramatic effect on your life expectancy."

"Hello, Petrovitch-san."

"Iguro. Tell me you haven't just killed several people."

"There was… an unfortunate event, Petrovitch-san. I have my orders."

"What the *huy* is that supposed to mean? Your orders come from me, and I'm telling you that you and your crew need to put down your guns and come out, hands on your head."

"I must respectfully decline. Surrender does not sit well with me, and I have a job to do. Since I have failed in all the tasks I have been given so far, I intend to see this one to completion." Iguro sighed. "It has been a difficult time for us all."

"You do know I'm coming in, don't you?"

"I have anticipated that."

"*Poshol nahuj.*" He pulled his gun and pointed inside Regent's Park. "There has to be another way."

Valentina and Tabletop sprang forward, covering each other as they scuttled from one point of cover to the next. Lucy stumbled out,

and Petrovitch glared at her until she stopped.

"You're not coming. It's too dangerous."

"But…"

"I'm terrified of losing you. Do you understand?"

"I need to do my bit." She found her pistol and showed Petrovitch she remembered how to use it. "You let them do dangerous."

"They're soldiers, Lucy."

"And what are you?" She was next to him, holding him with her steady gaze. She may have even grown over the last day or so, because she looked him straight in the eye.

"Damaged. That's what I am. And I don't want you to turn out the same way."

"You can't go in there and stop me from following you at the same time."

"Stay behind me, then. Don't do anything stupid." He swallowed hard and ran to where Tabletop was, scanning a pathway between domiks with her gun held rigid in front of her.

"We're clear so far."

"It's fine: we're getting a map. I'll overlay the target information and send it to your arm. My best guess is that they're going to try and destroy Container Zero. I think we need to keep it intact."

Michael forwarded the satellite imagery, and Petrovitch could see himself as a glowing white dot against the darkness of the container. He tagged the others, and then moved his point-of-view to Container Zero.

Nine sources, and he knew which one was Iguro. They'd set up a crude perimeter, concentrating on the only way in by vehicle. Two were in the container: he couldn't see them, but he could sense their transmissions.

Tabletop studied the screen on her forearm. "One to pin them down, the others to take them from behind."

"We need to take the container before they rig it. I don't fancy fighting over another bomb. How about me, Tina and Lucy go straight down the middle, and you go wide?"

"There's someone coming."

Petrovitch automatically looked toward the next corner further in. But the map showed a figure coming from the entrance. He turned back.

Madeleine was striding out. She'd ditched her iconic leathers, the ones she'd lived in for the best part of a year, and traded them for a slightly too small suit of impact armor, and a Joan-issue ceramic helmet. She had her Vatican special in one hand, and a rucksack in the other.

"Thinking of starting without me?" She dumped the rucksack on

the ground and unzipped it. Inside were spare clips of ammunition and half a dozen stun grenades. “We have an armory. I thought I ought to raid it.”

Petrovitch took a grenade and threw it underarm to Valentina, then another one. He put one in each of his own pockets. When he looked up, Lucy had her eyebrows raised.

“Screw up with one of these and you lose your hand.”

“You’ve never thrown a grenade in your life,” she countered.

“I don’t mind losing a hand. Or my good looks.” He rummaged around, looking for the right caliber of bullets. “You do not get to play with explosives.”

“Who said anything about playing?”

He found a clip and flicked the bullets into his pocket, on top of the grenade. “No.”

“Why is she here anyway?” asked Madeleine. She took the last of the grenades and was able to hold both in one hand.

“Misplaced loyalty.”

She gave a tight smile. “There seems to be a lot of it about. I take it you have a plan.”

“Nine of them at Container Zero. Sonja’s right-hand man Iguro is there. We’ll hit them from the front. Tabletop is flanking.”

“Can’t you call her by her name?”

“It is her name.” He checked his map and started forward. “Michael’s providing a satellite feed. We know exactly where they are.”

“But do we know what they’re doing?”

“Getting rid of the evidence.” He turned to Tabletop. “Okay?”

She nodded, and slipped down the narrow passage between two rusting containers. Even though she vanished from view, Petrovitch had her tagged. He watched her sweep around in an arc, using the same information he was receiving to stay out of sight.

Until she needed to strike. She positioned herself close to one guard and waited for a diversion. Petrovitch was happy to supply it. He hooked his finger in the pin of his first grenade, and judged the distance he needed to throw it. He could reconstruct the ground ahead of him so that the containers turned into wire frames, and he could see through them. The track curved gently around, and stopped in front of Container Zero.

Easy, then. He squeezed the lever, yanked the pin free and lobbed the grenade. It bounced once with a hollow boom against a steel roof, then fell neatly into the open ground in front of the open container.

Valentina watched the trajectory of his throw and followed it with one of her own.

The first thunderclap sound was bad enough, and the second

came a moment later. Two blinding flashes of lightning burned sharp shadows against the walls. Tabletop stepped out of her hiding place and put a single round in the back of a man's head.

"One," she said, and moved fast toward the next.

Iguro's men were shooting wildly. Ricochets rattled container walls, and Valentina was happy to let them know she had something bigger than a side arm. She raked the outside curve of the turn, sending bullets howling. Tabletop had reached her second target, and he wasn't even looking out toward the rest of the domiks anymore, but back to the rest of his group, terrified of being the last one alive.

He needn't have worried.

"Two," said Tabletop.

Petrovitch readied his second grenade. Madeleine holstered her gun and dragged out both her pins.

"We need to finish this." She ran the inside of the curve, and threw both grenades high back over her head. Without waiting for them to land, she took her gun again and turned the corner.

"*Chyort.*"

Valentina took one down that had chosen to run toward her; Tabletop, a third. The grenades landed, bounced, and exploded, sharp cracks that stiffened the already smoky air. The light was searing, and only those with their eyes tightly closed could see afterward.

In the next five seconds, before Petrovitch could tumble to the ground behind his wife, before Tabletop could step into plain sight and pick her next victim, Madeleine had aimed and fired three times.

They were dead before they knew they'd been shot. She ignored the falling bodies and walked forward toward the open doors of Container Zero. One man was still trying to press a detonator into a block of gray marzipan. Then he wasn't, the two items he was trying to marry falling from his opening hands.

The last was pressing himself up against the far wall, and had every reason to believe Madeleine was going to kill him too.

She didn't break her stride. She advanced on him, reached down, picked him up by the throat and threw him against the side of the container. Then she went for him again, taking a handful of uniform between his shoulder blades and launching him against the opposite wall.

She stood there, breathing hard, for a moment, while she watched for any movement. She didn't see any, and turned away, back into the light.

Lucy peeked out from behind a container, and stared wide-eyed at the scene.

"Fuck."

Petrovitch was content to lie on the cold packed earth. "Yeah.

Pretty much sums it up."

Tabletop went around, nudging the corpses with her foot, but Madeleine hadn't been aiming to wound. She kicked at Iguro, who rolled slightly one way, then back.

"What was I thinking?" Lucy said. "What did I think I was going to do?"

Petrovitch made his gun safe, then levered himself up. Valentina had gone to inspect the explosives inside the container, and he watched as she and Madeleine faced each other across the threshold.

Something resembling grudging respect passed between them, and they went on their way. Madeleine purposefully stepped over the bodies and pulled Petrovitch up the rest of the way to standing.

She paused to inspect the two holes in her armor where gel was leaking out. "We're going to have to stop Sonja."

"You're right."

"And that girl—our daughter—is not coming."

"I don't think she wants to anymore."

"Good. The other two: they can come with us."

"I thought you hated them?"

She pushed her automatic back into her holster. "They seem to think a lot of you, so I'm going to have to live with that."

27

When Petrovitch got back to the main gates, the workers were waiting. They'd heard the shots, and the subsequent silence, and hadn't known what to think.

"Did you…?" someone called.

"They're all dead, save one." He stopped, and they started to gather round. Very soon, he'd lost sight of any but the first couple of rows, so he climbed up the back of a flat-bed truck and sat on the edge. "Sorry about your friends. I hadn't expected Sonja to be so *yebani* stupid. You've lost people you know, and it's now on my watch. I'm responsible."

"What are you—we—going to do now?" shouted a woman from the back. When those around her turned to face her, she flushed scarlet and mumbled.

"No, you're right. I wanted to just ignore Sonja, but it looks like she has other ideas. And Mother has told me, in words of one syllable, that we can't just pretend she's not there." His left arm was almost out of power again. He'd had nowhere near enough time to recharge the batteries. He dragged it across his lap and growled at it, before addressing the crowd again. "The Oshicora Corporation has a couple of thousand people working for it. A lot of those are paper-pushers doing Freezone admin, but you've got her personal security detail that numbers a couple of hundred, and about twenty thousand *nikkeijin,* spread throughout the city."

"Do you think they're all going to fight us?"

"Good question. If they do, we're going to end up burning down a large part of what we've spent a year building up."

"I did ten years in the EDF," said a man, and the woman behind him said, "I was in the Metrozone police for five."

"Yeah, we're probably going to need people like you. But I don't want to have to build another army. They aren't Outies: they're our neighbors. We don't do that to them."

"Why are our mates dead, then?"

"Because Sonja Oshicora ordered Container Zero to be destroyed, and Takashi Iguro took those orders very seriously. Seriously enough to kill. Okay: so who have we got a complaint against?"

"It's Oshicora."

"And her alone. I'd like to try and keep the number of people who have to die over this to those who've already lost their lives. I can't do anything for them; I'm not a miracle worker. But neither am I going to start a war in which hundreds, maybe thousands, of people die. Been

there, done that. I still see it when I close my eyes."

He drew his legs under him and stood up on the truck, gazing down at the solemn faces waiting on his next words. It was unavoidable—he'd actively sought a reputation when he'd fought the Outies, deliberately creating myths that would inspire and encourage.

They were very difficult to dispel, no matter how hard he tried.

"Everyone with military or police training wait here. The rest of you: we need stretchers, we need body bags, we need identities from the work roster and I'll call the next of kin myself. There's stuff to be done. Let's be professional about it." He jerked his head. "Go on. You've got things to do, and so have I."

He was left with half a dozen, and Madeleine moved them away for an unhurried conversation.

Tabletop looked at them. "Unless you're prepared to blow the tower up with Sonja in it, you're going to need more."

"Or I could get all Jihad on her *zhopu,* get enough flying things in the air to bring it down. That would work."

"But you won't do it, will you?"

"No. Two reasons. First, it's going to make a hell of a mess and I'm not clearing it up. Second, I want to know why. I'm missing something here, something so enormous I can't see it because I'm in it. So yeah, I want to walk into her office and demand some answers." He looked in the direction of where Sonja was. He knew her phones. He could pinpoint her exactly. "She's not going to tell me until she's lost so completely she has nothing left to lose."

"In that case we need personnel, guns, vehicles, explosives and a plan."

"We've got enough earth-movers and construction equipment for an armored brigade. We have more cee-four than we can carry. Madeleine has the keys to the warehouse where all the firearms we've collected over the last eleven months are. The Freezone database tells me I have a couple of thousand ex-servicemen and women on the payroll." Petrovitch shrugged. "It's a start."

Tabletop held up her hand, and he used it to steady himself while he jumped down. "All you need now is a plan that'll mean you don't have to use any of it."

"Better give me a minute, then." He started to walk away, and swerved back. "Find Tina, tell her to take Lucy back to the arts college and pick up Lucy's stash. I feel some shock and awe coming on."

"Lucy's 'stash'?" She didn't question the request though, and used her suit comms to talk to Valentina, striding back toward the main gate.

He was alone, in what had been a semi-circle of formal park before the great entrance to the Regent's Park domik pile had landed

on it. The gardens had been concreted over, but the slab had cracked along the original lines of the paths and flower beds. Like everything in Armageddon, it had been done quickly, and not well.

Petrovitch walked, head down, following the cracks like a labyrinth.

He had to neutralize the Japanese work parties, convince them not to take sides, either his or Sonja's. Then there were Sonja's employees: they weren't soldiers, but they probably thought of themselves as servants and felt they owed her their loyalty.

They owed him loyalty too. He could exploit that. Old Man Oshicora had lost most of his staff, killed by the New Machine Jihad. The more recent hirings wouldn't have a residual fealty, transferring allegiance from father to daughter.

Her uniformed security guards—now that was going to be difficult, if not impossible. He had to find enough leverage to put himself between them and their boss, or he was going to have to do it the hard way.

They could hold out for as long as the ammunition did, and storming the tower was going to result in a bloodbath. He'd do pretty much anything to avoid that.

He walked, and when he reached a junction on the cracked concrete pad, he turned in an arbitrary direction. An idea slowly came to him, slower than it ought. It was hard to keep his thoughts in order when he was so very tired and kept being distracted by the fact of Sonja's betrayal.

Then he went slowly back to the main gates. Valentina's car had gone, along with Lucy. Madeleine had also vanished, along with a couple of trucks and all those he'd called out. The workers in Regent's Park were busy. The first of a fleet of ambulances whispered along the road and onto the dirt track that led inside.

Tabletop was there, though. She was sitting in a truck cab, her eyes shut and her head resting on the upholstery. Petrovitch climbed up to the driver's seat, by necessity using just his right hand to aid him, and slumped behind the wheel.

"Hey," he said.

"Hi." She didn't open her eyes. "Thanks."

"For what?"

"Giving me a home."

"That's okay."

"I think I'll enjoy being Irish."

"At least you'll be able to remember it. No more mind-wipes. Promise."

"That's good. Thought of something?"

"Yeah. Doing it now." He leaned back, wedging his knees against

the steering wheel. “Divide and conquer. I’ve called everyone with relevant experience here, regardless of nationality. There are a whole bunch of *nikkeijin* who were cops, and the Japanese riot police were *yebani* nails. I’ve extended the call to everyone in Sonja’s security teams—it’s the only message they’ve had on them for a while, so they’ll notice. I’m also giving them the Al Jazeera interview, because they’ll have missed that the first time around.”

“And if they don’t come over?”

“We’ll seal the whole block off: it’s easily done, as there are major roads bounding the tower on each side. Then I’ll give them another call and appeal to their better natures.”

“Still sounds like we’re going to have to fight.”

“Maybe we will. There’s one thing I can try before that point though.” He closed his own eyes. It was tempting, so very tempting. Five minutes, that was all he’d need. “I’m just going to walk in and dare them to shoot me.”

Now she was awake. “What?”

“The one constant factor in all of this has been that Sonja will not let me be harmed. The arm thing, while that wasn’t going to kill me, I think she was genuinely angry with those who’d done that to me. It wasn’t meant to happen. Everything else—the bomb, Iguro—she could’ve had me finished in half a dozen different ways, but they’ve always held off. I bet you that if I’d announced my presence back at Container Zero just now, I could have walked out and no one would have fired. I didn’t have the *yajtza* to do it then, but I’m just going to have to man up and do it this time.”

“You really think Madeleine’s going to let you do that?”

“She’s not in charge,” said Petrovitch. “I am.”

“And you’re worried about Oshicora’s crew shooting you?” Tabletop pursed her lips and stared out of the windshield. “It’s your wife you need to be scared of.”

“Me and Michael have killed tens of thousands of people between us. If you think that’s inured me to killing a few hundred more, you’d be wrong. If anything, it’s persuaded me that victory doesn’t automatically go to the side with the lowest body count.” The corner of his mouth twitched. “Sometimes there’s a better way of winning.”

“Good luck with that. I only know one way.”

“That’s because of the way you were made. Strange: there are a bunch of cardinals closeted in a room trying to work out if Michael’s alive, and yet none of them question our humanity, no matter how badly we’re put together.”

They sat in silence for a while, watching the activity outside. The ambulances that had arrived earlier, bounced and swayed their way back out, and a group of workers congregated to watch them go.

“There are days,” said Tabletop, “when I wonder who I was. Because I have no memories, all I have is how I react, and I don’t… I don’t like what I see. What was it that the Agency saw in me that made them think I’d make a good assassin? What did I do? Torture animals? Hurt people? Or did I just destroy them with a well-placed piece of gossip and watch while their lives imploded?”

Petrovitch shifted in his seat, counting the number of volunteers who’d responded to his call. He felt humbled. “Maddy says I’m wrong to call you Tabletop. Tina calls you Fiona, and I don’t think I’ve ever actually asked you which you’d prefer. I just assumed.”

“You’re not really Sam Petrovitch, are you? It’s not what your mother called you in the cradle, but you seem happy enough with what you have.” She shrugged. “Maybe I’ll pick a new name, one I’ve chosen myself. For now, I’ll stick with what I’ve got. It’s fine.”

“Okay.” He reached for the door handle. “Here they come.”

“Who?”

“The new republic.” He glanced in the wing mirror, and frowned. “*Yobany stos.*”

He kicked the door open and stepped out onto the footplate. There was a column of cars and trucks slowly rumbling down Marylebone. Valentina was at the head, and Lucy was sitting in the open window, holding a roof bar with one hand and a flag with the other.

The flag was red, and it wasn’t alone.

There were others, fluttering from aerials, wipers, radiator grilles, held by hand or tied to makeshift poles. A sea of red.

Petrovitch dropped to the ground, and Valentina pulled up next to him.

“What the *huy* have you done?”

“Hmm,” she said, not looking apologetic for a single moment. “We are having revolution, *da*?”

“Do you know what this looks like?”

“Looks like popular uprising of people against oppressors. Red is traditional color for such occasions. Is most visual, and does not show blood.” She turned the engine off and pointed to the back seat. There were boxes of black spheres, all chased with thin silver lines. “Since we have bombs, perhaps anarchist black would have been more appropriate.”

“But I like red,” said Lucy, scrambling out of the window. She headed for the back of the flatbed to raise the standard there.

“It’s as if a whole world of cultural meaning has cried out in terror and been suddenly silenced.” He tilted his face to the sky and groaned. “When this gets broadcast, I’m going to have some really difficult questions to answer.”

Valentina got out and looked back at the row of vehicles coming to a halt behind her. “When? They are already here.”

“Terrific.” Petrovitch watched people streaming onto the road and toward him. Mixed in with them was the glint of camera lenses and the parasol shadows of held-high satellite dishes.

He looked at the traffic patterns, the density of mobile phones, the bandwidth use across the Freezone. He turned around to greet another cavalcade coming down Euston Road.

They all had red flags too.

“Tina?”

“No. Is good. Shows we are united. Speak with one voice, act with one mind.” She took him by the arm and led him toward where Lucy stood, a modern-day Marianne. “Also, not shooting friends is good. Flag means we recognize our own.”

“At the risk of polarizing the rest of the planet.” Petrovitch accepted the bunk-up onto the truck. “This is not meant to be political.”

“Then you are deluding yourself,” said Valentina. “This has always been political. All this getting rid of old order, standing up to capitalist aggression, rights for artificial intelligence, starting own country…”

“My own country?”

“Of course. That is why we all have Irish passport, *da*? You will have freedom to do whatever you want.” She climbed up alongside him and reached back down into the pressing crowd for another hastily made flag. “This is revolution. Where is end? I do not know. All I know, this is beginning and we must be brave.”

28

They had enough people to seal off the streets: down Portland Place and along the Euston Road, covering Tottenham Court Road, and the south side of the square, Mortimer Street and Goodge Street.

It meant that everyone was set back from any immediate confrontation while confining the Oshicora loyalists to a small area. There'd been defections to Petrovitch, but not as many as he would have hoped. He'd have preferred them all to come over, and that would have been that, but no.

And Madeleine wasn't happy at all.

"There is no good reason for you to do this."

"There is every good reason for me to do this. She is not going to shoot me." Petrovitch watched as Madeleine reloaded his gun for him.

"All it takes is one—just one—nervous kid with his finger on the trigger and I'm a widow. I'm not going to let that happen." She slapped the magazine back home and presented him with the pistol's butt.

He took it from her and jammed it down the waistband of his trousers.

"I'm calling her and I'm arranging safe passage through the barricades they've put up. If we go in mob-handed, it's going to be carnage."

She grabbed him by the scaffolding on his arm and pulled him somewhere more private. That meant marching him across to the church that stood on the corner, and under the blackened and dead branches of the trees that flanked it.

"I don't want to lose you. Not now."

Petrovitch reached out and slid his finger into one of the holes in her impact armor, scooping out some of the gel and holding it up so she couldn't help but see it. "You didn't give me that choice, did you?"

"You've got other people."

"Oh, okay. Which one do you approve of to take your place? Tina? Happy with that? Or Tabletop? Want to imagine me and her together?"

"You know I…"

"Or both together? They could have me on a time-share, and I could hope neither of them got jealous enough to put a blade in the other's guts."

"Sam, I don't mean," she started, but he interrupted her again.

"What the *huy* do you mean?" He squared up to her, shaking his arm free and baring his teeth. "You are not a replaceable part. You

never were. *Yobany stos,* I missed you. Every night, every day, no let-up. I have friends, I have a daughter, but you're my wife."

"Then listen to me. You're going to get yourself killed, and I'm going to destroy myself with guilt. I wasn't there for all that time, and now I face losing you forever. You cannot go out there and expect them not to shoot you. It's insane." Her face had gone white, and she was shaking. She was scared, pure and simple. Terrified.

"Sit down," said Petrovitch. "Come and sit down."

The steps up to the church porch were close by, and they sat together, side by side, hips pressed against each other even though there was plenty of space.

"Look. I've got people queuing up to throw themselves in front of me and take the bullet meant for me. You, Tina, Tabletop, Lucy even in her own cackhanded way, and you're only just ahead of a couple of thousand Freezone workers who seem determined to follow me, lemming-like, off the precipice. I don't want that. I don't want anyone to die because of me."

"We're doing it because we love you."

"You're doing it because you're all bat-shit crazy," he grumbled. "I've had enough. I'm taking some decisions for myself, and I don't have to put them in front of a committee to get them ratified. I'm no one's *shestiorka.* If someone's going down because I've screwed up, I want that someone to be me."

"I don't. I'd rather it was anyone else but you."

"Yeah. I'd rather it was like that, too, but I'm going to stick my middle finger up at Fate and tell her to *idi v'zhopu.*" He shrugged. "What else am I supposed to do?"

"You could stay safe, here with me."

"And what happens to Sonja? Is there anyone who can do something about her, without people bayoneting each other in the street? Anyone but me?"

Madeleine started to cry soundlessly. Fat tears dropped into her lap. "Don't do this."

"There's no one else. We both know that." He stood and kissed the top of her head, where her shaved head ended and her mane of plaited hair started.

"At least take my armor." She pulled at her sleeves until the Velcro fastenings at the back started to part. She was half out of it in seconds, clawing at the straps that held it in place, as if her speed would help protect him.

"Maddy, stop." He put his hand on one side of the stiff collar, and moved it to cover her shoulder again. Under the armor, she wore a pale skinsuit, and it was hellishly distracting. "Just stop. I can barely stand up as it is, and I'm not going to fight. I'm going to talk. Impact

armor isn't going to help."

"I have to do something."

"Be here when I get back? That would be good." He kissed her again, and made the long walk back across the road.

Valentina's eyes narrowed as he approached. "Problem?"

"Yeah. We're doing it anyway. Load me up."

She had the box of singularity bombs out next to her, and she hooked four onto the exposed metalwork of his arm. Individually, they didn't weigh that much: together, with their batteries and timers, they dragged all the harder.

"Here," said Lucy, pressing a bottle of water on him. She'd already cracked the seal on the top. "Anything else you need?"

"Vodka?"

"I don't know." She was suddenly flustered. "We can get some."

"Joke," he said. "I'm not serious. Well, not that serious. I shouldn't really be drunk in charge of implosives, but a quick slug of the hard stuff would've gone down well. No matter."

He patted his pockets in case he'd forgotten something, but he didn't have anything in them anyway. His passport was in his courier bag, in Valentina's car. Madeleine's was there too. He hadn't told her. If things went badly, he never would.

Too late now.

"Okay." He started out down the street toward the tower, past the two groups of armed men and women clustered at each corner behind their hastily erected barricades. He stopped when he crossed the road markings and looked back. Tabletop, Valentina and Lucy seemed uncertain as to what to do next: one or other of them was with him almost all the time.

"What?" called Tabletop.

"Aren't you supposed to wish me luck?"

"You don't believe in luck. You don't leave anything to chance."

"Yeah, well." He turned again. He could see the tower, its strange top-heavy shape and thin waist surrounded by microwave dishes. "First time for everything."

The street was narrow, with three- and four-story houses. The ground floors had mostly been turned into shops, and steel shutters covered their windows. The Jihad had passed through one way, and the Outies the other, but the damage had been repaired. It was mostly as it had been, except for the line of cars parked across the street further down.

He undid the bottle with his teeth and spat the cap out. He drank half the water. It was a poor substitute for coffee. He unlocked Sonja's phone and called her up.

"Hey. I'm walking down Cleveland Street toward your lines. No

one's going to take a pot-shot at me, are they?"

"Sam? What's going on?" She sounded lost.

"Well now. At the risk of sounding like a pre-Armageddon cop show, you're surrounded. I've a few thousand armed ex-soldiers and police blocking off every road away from the tower, and they know what to do if I don't come back. One way or another, this ends today. How it ends is up to you, but I thought it worthwhile to try and talk our way to a solution rather than start another war."

"I… I can see you."

Petrovitch's eyes tried to zoom in all the way to the top of the structure, but the reflections of sky off the slabs of glass defeated him. He raised the bottle of water anyway, and kept walking.

"So what's it going to be? Can we talk?"

"We could always talk, but you never needed to be actually there, did you?"

"No. This time, though, it's important to do it face to face. We need to see the windows of each other's soul. No lies. Just the truth, and I don't care how uncomfortable that is for either of us."

The barricade of cars was just ahead, and he found he'd collected several glowing red laser dots that buzzed around his chest. It looked like most of the shooters wouldn't be able to hit a double-decker at ten paces, but as Madeleine had pointed out, it'd only take one bullet.

He stopped and looked at the figures crouching behind the trunks and hoods, fixing each one of them with a hard stare. He saw them nervous, panicky even. Not a good combination with firearms.

"They're not going to shoot me, are they?" he asked Sonja.

"They know not to. Whatever happens."

"I suppose I've bet my life on longer odds," he said. He shrugged and kept on going until he was on one side of a red family-sized car, and the Oshicora guards on the other. One man lowered his rifle, and with a little shake of his head, told his colleagues to do the same.

"Petrovitch-san. We cannot let you pass."

"Yeah, about that. I'm coming through whether you like it or not. So either you shift these cars, or I'll shift them for you."

The man in charge—at least, the man who had assumed leadership in the absence of anyone else—regarded Petrovitch's broken form. "That would seem unlikely."

Petrovitch set his bottle of water down on the road and unhooked one of the spheres hanging from his arm. "Unlikely? Give me a lever long enough and a place to stand, and I could move the world." He put the hook through the door handle and fiddled with a switch.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm priming this singularity generator. I've never used one of these things in the open before, so I have no idea what's going to

happen." He made a face. "That's not strictly true: I know that for a length of time too small to measure, a black hole is going to appear at the very center of this ball, and everything around it is going to want to fall inside it, even light itself. I've used them for tunneling, and once, I destroyed the inside of a house using just one of these."

"Is it a bomb?"

"No. Bombs explode." He gazed over the top of the car. "This sucks big time, and I really wouldn't recommend being anywhere near it when it turns on."

He leaned forward and pressed the button next to the switch. A light flicked from green to red. He scooped up his water and started to back up. The men on the far side of the barricade began to move away, too.

"The thing is," called Petrovitch, "the timer was made by a fifteen-year-old girl. She's normally pretty good at stuff like this, but you know how difficult it is to read the right value off a resistor when it's late and your eyes hurt."

He'd put five meters between him and the device and he was sweating. It wasn't far enough, and he hadn't been joking about the timer. He kept on walking backward, as fast as he could manage.

Yet perversely, he didn't want to miss a single moment.

And right on cue, the bomb vanished like a darkly shining flashbulb. The car it was attached to spasmed and warped. In a blink, it was tiny, inside out, glowing with blue fire. The road pocked, bloomed, tarmac ripped free, the cobblestones underneath shattering into dust. The vehicles on either side jerked like they'd been struck by a runaway truck, twisting around, dragging their tires, bending, breaking, glass flying.

He could feel the momentary pull himself, a vast hand reaching out to haul him irresistibly inward. He stamped down hard, leaning back, and lost his footing anyway. His backside connected with the road surface at an angle, and slid a heart-stopping but insignificant distance toward the mangling wreckage and opening crater.

The air was full of fumes. There was a pop, and a pool of gasoline ignited, burning with a sooty red flame. Within a second, everything had stopped moving, and Petrovitch could get up again.

The flanking cars were both half in the hole in the road, their paintwork cracking and flaking in the heat, their panels hanging off and their chassis bent like toffee. Of the third car, there was nothing to be seen. Yet the windows in the surrounding buildings were untouched.

He still had three of those bad boys hanging from his arm, and he felt invincible. He skirted the tipped-up rear of one car and ignored the guards sprawled in the road, mere mortals all.

“Hi, Sonja.”

“Oh my God.” She would have seen it all. She would have had a better viewpoint than Petrovitch. “That’s what it does.”

“Tell whoever’s on the front desk not to get in my way. I know you can’t call them, but the ground floor is only thirty seconds away. You can’t bar the doors against me, and if you block the lifts, I’ll just walk up. It’ll take longer, and I’ll be pissed off when I get there, but it’s inevitable all the same.”

He heard her issue a hurried instruction, then come back breathless. “Sam. I can’t… I’m scared.”

“I’m not. Not anymore.” The low building that sat at the base of the tower was just beyond the next junction. He was being watched, but not by millions across the globe: just by a few hundred. Some were pressed, like their employer, against their office windows as he strode up to the street-level canopy that hung over the doorway. Others, armed guards forming a secondary line of defense, huddled in doorways and behind pieces of street furniture. They let him pass, and he didn’t expect anything less.

He had schematics, architects’ plans, photographs. He could navigate his own way to the elevator shaft, and he’d ride in one all the way to the top, despite his dislike of that mode of transport. It was true: he wasn’t frightened at all, by anything.

Petrovitch barged through the doors and marched through the foyer.

“Get the kettle on. I’m coming up.”

29

The acceleration of the elevator made him feel squat and heavy. Its deceleration made him fluttery and dizzy. He'd ridden up alone, and now waited for the doors to spring wide.

When they did, he found himself looking out at a whole crowd of people pressed together, forming a rough semi-circle around the elevator. They shrank back as one as he stepped forward, then silently filtered around him, trying to put as much distance between them and him as possible. One by one, they squeezed into the elevator car, and when it was full, the doors closed again.

There was just a handful left behind, and as the second elevator came back up, they hurriedly left too. All that remained were empty desks, blank computers, and abandoned chairs halfway across the floor. The humanizing knick-knacks of office life were still present—photographs, mascots, pot plants—but not the humans. Bar one.

The great circular sweep of the windows provided a complete view of the Freezone, and Petrovitch could understand why Sonja had placed the Freezone bureaucracy here: it had given her the illusion of control and, for those who worked for her, the illusion of being constantly watched.

He walked around quite slowly, not so much as to delay the meeting with Sonja but to put it in its proper context. Here was the city laid out beneath him: he'd saved it twice, and he'd be damned if he was going to have to do it a third time. It shouldn't need saving from its friends, only its enemies.

As her desk became visible from behind the inner curve of the room, he could see her. She was upright, hands folded in her lap, dressed in a smart white blouse and dark jacket. Quite the image of Madam President Oshicora, when all she was was Sonja, only surviving child of a dead refugee, washed up on the shore like flotsam. The clothes, the title, meant nothing now. She'd inherited a business empire, and she was left with what she wore and nothing else.

He was almost sorry for her, but she and she alone was the reason he was carrying quantum destruction on his shattered arm and there was no food in his belly.

She didn't look at him as he approached, not even when he pulled up a spare chair and parked himself down in front of her. He had no such qualms, and stared at her until she finally stole a glance at him from under her fringe.

"Yeah, so you are in there." He drank the rest of his water, and engaged in a futile search for a steaming mug or a pot of coal-black

brew. “Anything to say about this? Anything at all?”

“I did it for you,” she said.

“You’re going to have to explain that, because I’m not grateful.”

She pressed her lips together and reached up to scratch at the corner of one eye. Her whole body was tense, and when she lowered her hand again, it made a claw before it disappeared back onto her knees.

Then she dropped her chin onto her chest and sighed. “It doesn’t matter now. It’s over, isn’t it?”

“Pretty much. You can still make some decisions that are important, like getting your crew to put their guns down, and telling them I still need them. Which I do.”

“I can do all that, but it won’t make a difference.”

“It will to me.”

“No. Because you’ll be dead soon enough.” She caught his gaze and held it. “I can’t protect you any longer. Everything I’ve done, everything I’ve tried to do: it’s come unraveled because you’re too stubborn, too independent, too good at getting out of the trap I set for you. I thought I’d thought of, if not everything, enough. I was wrong.”

Petrovitch blinked in surprise. “What have you done?”

“I’ve been keeping the Americans from killing you. They told me that if I didn’t do something about you, they would.” She looked up at the ceiling. “So I said I’d, well, emasculate you. Ruin your life, your reputation, your support. Isolate you, run you down, capture you and make sure you’d never be a threat to them again. I promised I’d do all that because I can’t bear the thought of losing you.”

“Ah, *chyort.*” He leaned forward and put his head on the desk.

“I found the Prophet of the New Machine Jihad in the Metrozone and kept him and his crazies safe until I needed them, I set up Container Zero, I used mercenaries to take the bomb from you and give it to the Jihad. I made sure that no one could connect me to any of the separate parts of the overall plan, and I made sure by getting rid of anyone who was involved. The number of ways you can lose inconvenient bodies when you’re in charge of waste disposal are almost limitless.” She sighed. “Then you decided that you weren’t going to roll over after all. You decided you were going to fight back—had already decided months ago that you were going to fight back against every and any thing that stood in your way—and it all fell apart.”

He slowly sat up and rubbed the crease in his forehead caused by the edge of the desk. “You, you,” and he struggled for the right word, one that would convey the utter futility of her scheme and his complete contempt for it. “You muppet.”

“I lost control. Of you, of the Jihad, of my own people. I couldn’t

keep it together any longer. Now, you're going to die, and there's nothing I can do about it." She slumped back in her chair, finally relieved of the burden she'd been carrying. She even smiled. "Sorry doesn't really cut it, though."

"No," said Petrovitch quietly. "No, it doesn't. How long's this been in play?"

"Ten months. Someone came to see me, early on. My seat was barely warm. I thought he was here for one thing, turned out he was here for something completely different. You know how they work now: no electronic communications, everything done in person, records written down on paper. He convinced me that you were a hair-trigger away from being assassinated, but the U.S. wanted to avoid another showdown with the EU, so soon after the last one."

"You know what you should have done, don't you? Right there and then? Held him at gunpoint and called security. We could have won that battle diplomatically, and no one would have had to die. You know who that man was?"

"He was CIA…"

"He was the controller, the top dog, the big man. Tina and Tabletop have been trying to find him forever. And he was here in your office. That was when you fucked up, not yesterday."

"Either I did what he said, or he'd kill you." She shrugged. "I did what I thought was best. For you. I really did do it for you. I know you're going to hate me now. I know you're going to tell the whole world what I've done. It won't save you. In fact, they're probably going to kill us both now."

Petrovitch stood up, the back of his legs pushing hard against the chair seat and shoving it across the floor. He dragged his fingers through his greasy hair and scratched at his scalp. He picked up his empty water bottle and crinkled it with his fingers before throwing it ineffectually at the line of windows. He watched it fall short, and scowled at it for not producing the satisfying sound he felt he needed.

"Even if you hadn't shopped him straightaway, imagine what we could have done. We could have stitched up his whole cell and paraded them handcuffed in front of the world; a farewell gift from the Freezone. But no. You decided—you, just you—to bend over and take it as deep as they wanted." He wrestled his chair back in front of her again. "You should have told me. At the very beginning."

"He said if I did that, they'd kill you anyway."

"And just how was he going to find out? If he was bugging you, I could have stopped him without him even noticing. If he was watching you, there are a thousand different ways of losing a tail. If he had someone on your staff, all you had to do was be alone for five minutes. There was no need for any of this." Petrovitch threw himself

down in the chair and wheeled it right up to the desk. “He didn’t have the resources to do anything. I was too well protected, and using you was the only way he could get to me. And you fell for his smoke and mirrors, when you should have told him to shove it up his *zhopu*.”

“I wasn’t willing to take the risk. They’re not amateurs, Sam.” Now she was sitting forward, wanting him to understand even if he didn’t agree. “Look what happened last time—they did everything they set out to do and you couldn’t stop them then. They brought the Oshicora Tower down, they trapped Michael…”

“They didn’t get me. They didn’t get Maddy. They didn’t get you.”

“That was just luck. All three of us had agents working next to us, day in, day out. None of us noticed.”

“Harry Chain did,” he countered.

“They blew him up! I saw the pictures of what he looked like after he’d been cut out of his car.” Suddenly, it was Sonja of old: passionate, driven, determined to get what she wanted. “You’re not indestructible. I had to do something to keep them from killing you—all this time you’ve had, nearly a year, you’ve been able to live free and do whatever you want. It’s because of the sacrifice that I made for you. The Freezone has got this far, because of me. Don’t tell me I did something wrong. I made the right decision.”

“The *huy* you did,” he shouted at her, his heart spinning faster, his breathing tight and quick. “It wasn’t your decision to make, Sonja. You don’t get to decide how I live.”

“I got to decide whether you did live, though. I chose right.”

“What you chose was that I’d live and everyone else involved with your crazy-stupid plan would die. The people you hired. The New Machine Jihad. My friends. My wife. Lucy. All of them, expendable, as long as you saved me.”

She jutted her chin. “Yes.”

He picked up the desk between them: lifted it up with one hand and hurled it aside. This was the chaos he wanted: the ripped cables, the fluttering paper, the clatter and crash of office stationery.

“What sort of life would that be, you *dura?* Everything that I have to live for would be gone.”

She pushed away from him, pedaling backward until she banged against another desk, knocking it hard, while he remained where he was.

“Did you think I’d ever agree to what you’ve done?”

“No. That’s why I was never going to tell you. You’d never find out what I had to do and you’d be—if not happy—content. And if not content, at least you’d be alive.”

He gritted his teeth and sent a monitor flying with a well-aimed kick. “That’s not living. That’s worse than dying.”

“There’s nothing worse than dying. It means the end. No more opportunities, no more choices, no more chances. Anything can happen, but not if you’re dead.” She found her feet and stood shakily. “I’ve lost my mother, my brother, and my father. They don’t get a say in what happens anymore. They can’t help me. They can’t do anything because they’re dead. I used my life to make sure that the one person —the one man important to me—didn’t die.”

“You don’t get it, do you? You just don’t get it.” He circled around her. He didn’t trust himself to be anywhere within arm’s reach of her. “You might be able to live with the choices you’ve made, all from the best possible motives, all strung together with impeccable logic. But I can’t.”

“I still did it for you.”

“I know that. I know you paid some anonymous people to fabricate Container Zero, then fed them into the incinerator. I know you encouraged the Prophet of the New Machine Jihad to believe he could free his god while all along you were planning to blow him up with his own bomb. I know you used Maddy’s priest to poison our marriage and try and make us hate each other. I know you sent Iguro to try and clean up the mess you made, and now he’s lying in a fridge somewhere. I know you did all that for me. I know Tina and Tabletop and Lucy are just inconveniences and you’d have to get rid of them, too. I know you’d have left Michael to wonder forever why no one was coming to find him.”

“That’s what I did. That’s what I’d do. That’s the cost of your life.”

“But it’s not you paying, is it? It’s always everyone else, and I don’t think it’s fair.” He laughed, harsh and abrupt. “Look at me. I’ve got morals all of a sudden. Yeah, well, let’s run with this. It’s not fair that you used people without their permission. You should always give them a chance to say no.”

“But what are they there for, otherwise? We’re more important than they are. We actually give their lives meaning. You think a soldier is more important than the general? A salaryman more important than the CEO? They’re nothing, and they know it. They wait for leaders like you and me to use them, and they’re glad when that happens. You’ve done it yourself: you got Michael to make the EDF believe they were getting their orders from Brussels, when they were getting them from you. You used them and you didn’t ask their permission. They were there, and you needed them.” She saw she’d scored a hit by the sour look on Petrovitch’s face. “Morals are nice, but people like us have to forget about them sometimes. We see the bigger picture, we see what needs to be done.”

“Okay.” He held up his hand. “Bang to rights. That’s exactly what I did. I thought that was what I had to do to break the Outies, and for

the best of reasons, too: I wanted to find Maddy. Hers was the life I had to save, and the rest of them could go to hell. I behaved just like you've done."

"Maybe then," said Sonja quietly, "we can work something out."

"One problem." He still had his hand up, and he swapped his open palm for a rigid index finger. "Just one. I was wrong. I shouldn't have taken away someone's right to decide whether they fight or run, or to work out for themselves whose side they really want to be on. It was a mistake, and I won't make it again."

She was staring at him, incredulous.

"I've learned a better way of doing things," he said. "I have friends now, and we do things for each other because we want to, and this is normal, you know? I have a wife, and yeah, things have been difficult between us for longer than they haven't, but I know I'm supposed to do stuff for her because it'll make her happy and not because I'll get more sex, or I won't have to go shopping with her, or whatever. And if I ask someone a favor, I hope they'll say yes rather than no, but I won't ruin their life if they refuse me, and I'll only ask if it's something I can't do rather than something I think is beneath me or too dangerous. And in asking, I put myself in their debt, and they can call on that, and I should be grateful that they see me as reliable or competent enough to be able to help them. *Chyort,* I've changed so much, I can barely believe it."

"You can't mean any of that," said Sonja. "Tell me none of that is true."

"I can't. That's why I want nothing to do with this, or you. You're not…" He felt he was ten again, and it made him squirm. "You're not my friend anymore, because friends don't do this to each other. They don't take away each other's dignity or freedom. They don't connive with their enemies behind their backs, and they don't lie to their faces. I understand all that now. I might not be very good at it, but I know what I should do."

He was spent, but his own confession had surprised him. He almost felt good about himself.

Sonja reached down to her ankle and, with a rasp of Velcro, released the small pistol from its holster. She curled her finger over the trigger and pointed the barrel at Petrovitch.

He raised his eyebrows, but not his own automatic, which still pressed cold and hard against his skin. "So is this your answer? Kill me: after all that effort you went to, to save my life?"

She was breathing slow and deep. Her aim didn't waver, and after a few moments of disquiet, Petrovitch found that he didn't care.

"Meh," he shrugged, "if I'm going to fail, I may as well fail spectacularly."

He turned his back on her, and started to walk slowly toward the elevator. He hadn't gone more than a couple of steps when he heard Sonja call his name. He looked over his shoulder just in time to see her take the gun in her mouth and blow the back of her head off.

He couldn't unsee the act itself, but he did manage to look away while her body fell with a thump onto the carpet.

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There was nothing he could do. Not now. Not for her. He didn't need to go over and check: he'd shot enough people in the head to know she wasn't getting up again. He stared at her for a long time, thinking through everything and what might have been.

It could have been so very different. He could have let Marchenkho kidnap her, and then Hijo wouldn't have killed Old Man Oshicora, the New Machine Jihad would never have risen, and the Outies would never have broken through the cordon. Madeleine would have never broken her vows, Lucy's parents would still be alive, and maybe, just maybe, Tabletop would be doing her backflips in a cheerleading squad rather than having herself turned into a weapon.

He and Pif would still have discovered their equations. The world would still have turned.

Instead, he had this. And even if it wasn't his fault, it was his responsibility.

"I still don't know why you were on your own that morning. Perhaps you'd secretly arranged to meet a girlfriend, or a boy, and you didn't want your bodyguards hanging around. Or maybe you just wanted to slum it with the rest of us, see how the little people lived. Marchenkho was waiting, had always been waiting. And there, right there on the curbside, I was given a chance to redeem myself. I didn't think about where it would lead." He sighed and took the weight of his left arm in his right hand. "But neither did you, and what I did was right, and I'm not sorry."

After that, it was just a question of riding back down to the ground floor. Thirty seconds, almost like falling, not quite like flying. As the elevator slowed, the sensation was lost. The world returned in all its terrifying, dazzling complexity.

The doors opened. A sea of silent people faced him. He stepped out across the threshold and saw their expressions suspended somewhere between hope and despair. Such was the weight of unrealistic expectation. Petrovitch was momentarily at a loss for words.

"Yeah. That didn't go well," he said, pressing his finger against the bridge of his nose. "I could give you all the details, and I will, just as soon as I can make sense of it myself. You've been working for the Freezone, and I want you to keep doing that. Your wages will be paid, all contracts honored. If you don't think you know what it is you're supposed to be doing anymore, then tell me and I'll find something.

It's not like we're running out of jobs to do."

There came a reaction that he wasn't expecting. It was relief.

The elevator doors trundled shut, and he glanced around. "If you work upstairs, you might want to take the rest of the day off. I'll get someone unconnected with you all to clean things up."

He waited for one of them to say something, but no one volunteered this time, not even to ask him what had happened to Miss Sonja.

"Right, then. I'll be going. You know where to reach me." He set a routine running that would unlock their phones and computers, and as the crowd parted to let him through, all he could hear was the chiming and snatches of song as backed-up messages were delivered.

He was through the foyer and onto the street. The air was cold and clear, and he trembled as he breathed it in.

"Michael? We've got a problem. Amongst all the other problems."

[One that requires me to finish my conversation with the cardinals?]

"Yeah, I reckon it does. For now, anyway. Just before Sonja shot herself, she told me she'd been following CIA orders all year: either she make me her pet, or they'd kill me."

[That is a premise based on the supposition that CIA agents could realistically assassinate you. Did Sonja believe such an action was likely to succeed?]

"It doesn't matter if she thought it likely or not. She was too scared to take the risk. So she bought into the whole package."

[And she is now dead. Which means it is entirely possible the CIA cell is mobilizing to carry out their threat.]

"Or we've got incoming missiles, like before." He turned the corner, starting up Cleveland Street toward Regent's Park. "But unless they're going to nuke the whole of the Freezone, they can't guarantee they'll hit me. I don't think they'll do that."

[I will start searching for them at once.]

"That won't work. They operate differently now you've appeared: no electronic comms until the very last minute, and they've been living off the grid—what grid we have here, anyway."

[You are suggesting a different course?]

"Sonja pointed out how rubbish we were at finding the last lot of agents, even with you, even when there should have been plenty of traffic for us to find. We'll just waste time and get it wrong. So what is it that we want?"

[To be left in peace. To explore, to build, to dream.]

"*Huy,* yes. So how are we going to persuade the Americans to do that? What is it that we can do that will make them believe it's in their own best interests to leave us alone?"

Petrovitch was halfway up Cleveland Street, and almost level with the barricade he'd demolished. The fire had died out, but the wreckage remained, smoldering and hot. The guards had deserted their post, but he was gratified to see the red flags had stayed at the far end of the road.

[Any proactive sanctions we take against the United States of America will have unpredictable consequences.]

"You think?" He was being sarcastic, but Michael wasn't.

[Yes. You have been neglecting your news feeds,] said Michael, and a rectangle opened up at the side of his vision.

There was a station ident in the corner of the virtual screen—CNN—and a tag in another proclaiming it was a live feed. A man with a dark-blue nylon jacket and a forehead so bulbous that studio lights would glare off it like a mirror was clutching his mic and virtually swallowing it to make himself heard. In the background, and somewhere between him and the camera, were thousands of protestors, chanting, shouting, blowing whistles and waving placards.

There was clearly more to it than just a noisy rally—because a public demonstration of the sort Petrovitch was watching hadn't happened in any part of the USA for two decades.

The screen jumped. No longer viewed from ground level, with images of a distant white stone facade in the neo-classical style, but from the air. What had looked like thousands now became tens of thousands, enveloping a whole city block and beyond, packed into the park in front of the largest building and spilling out into the surrounding streets.

The early morning sun hung low over the distant towers of an office district: that meant some, if not most, of the protestors had been there all night. And still the reporter was trying to get his message across.

The news ticker refreshed itself, and scrolled "California Supreme Court siege."

"You have got to be *yebani* kidding me." Petrovitch realized he'd stopped short of the junction, and his hastily organized militia were wondering why. "Dalton."

[It appears that one Paul Dalton, attorney-at-law in New York state, has…]

"I know what he's done. I know. We talked about it. He was going to…"

[Present a writ of habeas corpus on behalf of Doctor Epiphany Ekanobi to the California Supreme Court. It appears such an action is unpopular with the local citizenry.]

"Where the *huy* are the police? The Yanks don't allow this sort of thing to happen. Not now." Petrovitch watched the aerial images as

they zoomed and panned across the crowd, which went right up to the steps of the court itself. Fists raised, painted cardboard banners waved, bottles and sticks rattled off the first-floor windows. He was incredulous. "*Hooy na ny!*"

"Sam? Sam!" Madeleine ran toward him, closing the distance with her long-legged strides.

He looked through the pictures from half a world away to Madeleine, standing right in front of him. "Hey."

"What happened? Where's Sonja. Why are you just standing there?"

He blinked CNN away. "We need to call a press conference."

"A what?" She grabbed his shoulders and inspected him for wounds. "What are you on about?"

"A press conference. Ten minutes. At Container Zero." He grabbed a list of accredited journalists in the Freezone and flashed them the message. "If they're going to kill me, they're going to have to do it in public."

She spun him around and checked his back and his skull. "You're not hurt—anymore than you were before. So please make some sense."

"Okay, okay. I will explain, but if you thought it was *pizdets* before, it's worse now. We don't have time to hang around." He faced her and put his hand behind her neck. When their foreheads were touching, he told her. "The CIA told Sonja they'd take me down if she didn't do something about me first. Now she's killed herself. And they're rioting in America."

"I don't understand. She… she did what?"

"This, everything that's happened: Sonja was trying to save me. And now she's dead, I guess the CIA really are coming for me. And Dalton went to California to try and get Pif out: a crowd of around twenty thousand Reconstructionists are attacking the courthouse." His fingers lightly gripped the rope of her hair and his hand ran the length of it from tip to tail. "We're not going to lose."

"How can you say that?"

"Because in a moment, I'll tell the world what Sonja told me. Better still, I'll show them. What's the point of having eyes that work like cameras if I don't record the important events?"

"Oh God. You've got it all saved. Even, even that."

"Yeah. Even that." He let go of her. "Come on. We need to get ready."

"But what about all these armed people we've just turned out onto the street?"

He thought furiously for a moment. "I'll appoint one in ten to collect the guns back in and return them to the trucks. They can guard

them, and any other ones the Oshicora security teams turn in. I'll give everyone the headlines and, *chyort:* running a city would be so much easier if foreign agents weren't trying to kill me."

Petrovitch composed a short message and pushed it out first to the Freezone, then to the newswires. Already, there were steadicams and portable satellite dishes wending their way into Regent's Park. Red flags flapped overhead, and there seemed to be people everywhere, moving in front and behind and all around, happy they'd not have to fight.

Tabletop took Petrovitch down in a flying tackle that came from nowhere, and she lay on top of him, spreading herself out like a starfish over his flattened form. "Stay still."

Madeleine's gun was in her hand, and Valentina's AK panned the crowd, then the windows and rooftops overlooking the road. Lucy planted her red flag in the road and held it out to cover him. A single shot echoed across the open space, and a hole pocked the flag, passing under Lucy's outstretched arm. The tarmac sparked in front of Petrovitch's head, and Tabletop immediately picked him up and laid him down again so she could curl around his back. A man in overalls dropped with a cry, clutching at a stain on his leg.

The ripple of awareness flowed outward. Madeleine shouted. "Shooter. Everyone down." Some in earshot started to duck, while others were left standing, briefly.

"Michael?"

[One moment.]

Lucy looked down at the hole. She shut her eyes tight, but didn't move.

[Park Crescent. Fourteen. Second floor, third window from the right. Encrypted digital transmissions of the same type as used in Tabletop's stealth suit.]

Petrovitch couldn't move. "Let me up, I know where they are."

"No, you tell us. We'll deal with it." She tightened her hold, and he knew he wasn't going anywhere without her permission.

"You've got it on your wrist."

She let go, glanced down at her forearm and pointed. "Three up, three right. Building on the left. Suppressing fire."

Not all the guns had been handed back, and from the noise, it sounded like none of them had. The entire frontage of the terrace smoked with pulverized stone and every window pane shattered.

[Target is moving. Staircase down. Going to the back of the building.]

"Send it to Tabletop." Already she and Valentina were running, waving their troops on. It looked wild and uncoordinated, but he couldn't see it for himself. Madeleine's hand had closed around his

backbrace and she carried him like a piece of luggage, his legs bouncing and skidding on the road, to find cover behind one of the trucks parked at the entrance.

She dumped him down, and glanced back out. The door to number fourteen was being kicked in, with scores more people branching off down side streets to cut off the agent's escape.

Lucy wandered past in a daze, still carrying her flag, and Madeleine eased her down next to Petrovitch.

"Thanks," he said to her. "I wish you'd decide whether you're a hero or not. I'm getting gray hair."

Lucy laughed, then sobbed. "I don't know. I just do stupid stuff sometimes."

"It worked this time. If you didn't save my life, you saved Tabletop's."

"Why are they doing this?"

"Because they're scared of us."

More gunfire sounded across the rooftops, sustained bursts that cackled and rattled in waves as the wind blew the sound.

[They have the target surrounded.]

"Now I'm thinking clearly: tell them to try and get him to surrender. Rights under the Geneva Convention, repatriation, all that. Assuming it's a him, don't know why."

[And if he will not comply?]

"I want it on record that we offered. If he won't go for it, see if you can hack his suit: it carries enough injectable painkillers to render him insensible."

[He is using a burst transmitter. It is non-trivial to hold the signal long enough to negotiate with the suit's hosting protocol.]

"A miracle would be really useful."

The shooting stuttered to a halt.

"Safe to move?" asked Madeleine.

"I don't know." His arm was aching, bleeding pain through the blocks he'd put into place. When he inspected it, he found that his superstructure was bent. The fragments of bone had shifted. "*Chyort voz'mi.*"

"What's the matter?"

"Forget it. We need to get these journos inside the park." He clawed his way upright. "Give them a couple of minutes to set up, dial their satellites if they need them, then just push me in front of them. Come on, Lucy."

[We have an unconscious CIA agent in custody.]

"*Yobany stos,* we've done something right at last." He put his good arm around Lucy's shoulders and together they rode the tide of people toward Container Zero. Madeleine stayed very close behind them, gun

drawn, trying to make certain no one else was going to pop up and have a go.

Petrovitch called Tabletop. “Strip the suit off him: I want him and it separated by the largest distance possible.”

“Then what do we do?”

“Make sure he stays alive. That would be brilliant.” He had a feral grin on his face that was obvious to everyone around him.

“You never look that happy,” said Lucy.

“The guy who nearly shot us is our prisoner. If he doesn’t want his perfect teeth and genetically enhanced face on every screen on the planet, then he’s going to have to hope Mackensie’ll call his dogs off.”

They were at Container Zero, and there were still ugly black bloodstains on the ground around its open doors. Those news teams who’d brought lights quickly extended them on their poles and clicked them on, and there was some jostling at the back as those coming late tried to push for a clear sightline.

“Look at them. It’s like a classroom.” Lucy slipped out from under Petrovitch’s arm and failed to notice that he nearly fell. His hand grasped for something solid, and Madeleine caught him.

“You can’t go on like this,” she said in his ear.

“I don’t have a choice. Not anymore. I put myself here, and now I have to see it through.”

“You can barely stand, Sam.”

“Then hold me up.” He scanned the people lining up in front of him, watching them more or less comply to Lucy’s rearranging of them: those closest were going to have to sit down in the dirt, those behind to kneel, then the third and fourth rows come to some arrangement whereby they looked over each other’s shoulders.

He couldn’t see Surur or her technician anywhere. He thought it odd, then realized that they’d still be stuck at Park Lane, Michael’s cable tethering them down, scared to move in case they broke his connection with the outside world.

It wasn’t needed now, hadn’t been needed since the AI had uploaded itself onto another computer, but he’d forgotten to tell Surur that. He hadn’t mentioned the details of Michael’s escape at all, content to let the question hang unanswered in the air.

He looked for the reporter’s phone, and found it. She didn’t pick up so he tried the one a bare meter away. The cameraman didn’t reply. So he went for the satellite link, riding down the microwave signal which he shared with the increasingly frantic attempts of her studio manager to speak to her, to him, to anyone.

The camera was still recording, still transferring its footage to the van. It showed a sideways world, lying on the road. The lens was focused on a drift of purple that could, at a squint, be resolved into

the body of a woman with glossy hair and flawless skin.

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Michael could multi-task. Petrovitch found it very difficult. He wanted to capture the last half-hour's output from the Al Jazeera camera, then review it, all the while trying to speak to the assembled press.

He started off incoherent, then lost track of what he was saying and stopped mid-sentence when something of awful significance happened onscreen.

Madeleine held up her hand to the crowd, and dragged Petrovitch around to face her. "You're doing it wrong."

"Something terrible is happening," he said. "There. That's when it was. Five of them. Same time as the shooter. Coordinated attack. Distracted us. They're going after Michael."

"Sam. You called this press conference. You're the public face of the Freezone. Either you can do this properly, or I'll pull the plug."

She didn't know what he knew. She thought he was flaking out.

"Okay." He took a deep breath. One thing at a time from now on, he promised himself, and turned to face the world. "This will only take a minute, and my daughter will have to stand in for me for questions if you really want to hang around afterward—but I don't think you will."

Lucy, standing with the press, blinked and her mouth opened to object. Petrovitch pointed at her and then placed his finger against his lips. "No interruptions. I've uploaded files to the major newswires, and you can grab them from there. One is Sonja Oshicora's confession that ten months ago, she was strong-armed into cooperating with the CIA to neutralize me. The events of the last two days have been the outworking of that plot, which has failed with the suicide of Sonja. The second is of footage taken fifteen minutes ago by Al Jazeera's cameraman, when both he and Yasmina Surur were killed by CIA agents intending to destroy the AI called Michael, and I suspect they're carrying a nuclear demolition charge."

All he could hear was the faint whirr of a motorized focus. Every sudden intake of breath was held, every heart skipped a beat. No one moved, not even to tremble.

"Michael is no longer in the vault under the Oshicora Tower—I made damn sure of that—and I'm appealing personally to President Mackensie to call off this futile attack before it goes any further. People are going to die and it'll be for nothing."

He paused. The turbine in his chest was spinning fast and his blood ran hot. He could feel the rage surge inside him.

“How dare they? How dare they come here, to the Metrozone, with a weapon like that. This is my city, my home, and I will not have it fucked up by a bunch of fuck-witted paranoid Reconstructionists acting like they’re in a fucking Western. The old order has failed. The new order is here. Long live the revolution.” He pulled his gun clear and ran as best he could through the middle of the press pack. “Lucy? You’re on. Madeleine? With me.”

He stumbled clear, and started issuing his orders. “Tabletop. Were you listening?”

“We’re already on our way.”

“Go straight to the tower. I don’t know if they’ve made it that far yet, so we might be able to trap them in the river. Take as many people as are willing to go with you, and please be careful. This is the end game, and they’re choosing to go out with a bang. I’ll send you my maps. Spread out along the line of the culvert, watch the manhole covers but don’t open any of them. Me and Madeleine are going to Park Lane: I’ll take the car.”

He limped as he went, his arm weighing him down, still festooned with three singularity bombs. He was much slower than Madeleine, who caught him up quickly.

“You have to get away,” she said.

“My Freezone, my responsibility.”

There was Valentina’s car. He reached out and started it up remotely, backing it around in a circle until it was pointing the right way along Euston Road. The wheels screeched, and he jumped in the driver’s seat. Madeleine launched herself in the back.

He didn’t touch the steering wheel, just plotted in a course and let the automatics take care of it.

“I can drive, you know,” said Madeleine. She folded the other half of the seat down so she could access the trunk. “I should have impounded her personal armory along with the rest.”

“Yeah. Tool up. We can’t afford to screw around.”

“Why can’t we just let them blow themselves up?” Her voice was muffled as she searched for heavy caliber weapons. “If it’s a nuke, it’s a small nuke. They’re setting it off underground.”

“I’m going to stop them because they shouldn’t be allowed to get away with it. I don’t need another reason. Bomb, no bomb. It doesn’t matter. They’re wrong. I’m right.” Petrovitch braced himself as the car hurtled around a corner. “Doing nothing is unforgivable.”

They were almost there, barreling down Park Lane toward the Wellington Arch. He looked in the rearview mirror: Madeleine had found an assault shotgun and enough shells to fill it. She caught his glance.

“This is it, then.”

"Yeah. Looks that way. *Yebani v'rot.*" He banged his hand against the window, the door, his seat, the dashboard. "Why can't the Yanks be smart like I am? Why can't they work out that Michael's gone?"

She slotted the last plastic shell into place and cranked one into the breach. "Even if one or all of those agents are having second thoughts about a suicide mission, they're trained to follow orders. All the way to the end."

The car screeched to a halt, delivering them next to the broadcast van. The body of Surur was behind the vehicle, a couple of meters shy of the back bumper. She'd been shot repeatedly, and was lying in a lake of congealed blood. The cameraman, still with his rig strapped to his body, was pole-axed near the side door.

There were holes in the van's white bodywork—fortunate that they hadn't hit anything vital in the cramped electronic interior, so that the prone camera had picked up five dark forms sweeping by, one carrying a green canvas bag that was obviously both far too heavy and too cylindrical for regular ordinance.

And there was the cable, lying on the ground, its plug torn off and disposed of.

Petrovitch scrambled out of the car and headed for the ramp down to the car park. "Michael? Anything?"

[If they are underground, the depth is sufficient to block signals. If they are above ground, they are maintaining radio silence.]

"Oh, they're down there all right. And even if Mackensie wanted to order them back, he can't."

[Sasha. Please reconsider. The Americans will die by their own hand, destroying a redundant piece of equipment. Is not the best option simply to let them do this?]

"Of course it is. But there's such a thing as justice, and I'm going to deliver it to them like an avenging angel." The overhang of the concrete roof was above him. "See you on the other side, Michael. The Pope might have doubts about you, but I don't." He switched links, briefly. "Tabletop. Collapse the tunnel east of the tower. I have a sort of plan."

He ran on, and he felt his feed fail. Madeleine overtook him, and slipped on a pair of night-vision goggles she'd found. "I'm going first."

"Why's that?"

"Because I can just shove you out of the way and there's nothing you can do about it." She jogged ahead of him, scanning the shadows, gun butt pressed hard against her shoulder.

The plastic sheeting in front of the tunnel entrance flapped, and sent the pair of them sliding apart, left and right, slowly converging on the scaffolding it covered. Madeleine eased a piece aside with the barrel of the shotgun.

“Clear,” she said, and climbed inside. Petrovitch followed in a poor second place: she was already lying down in the tunnel, moving forward on her elbows. He watched her feet recede, then scooted down the shallow slope on his backside. And when he arrived, his feet splashing into the river, she was ahead, stalking forward.

He wasn’t going to be left behind, even though he was reeling from one side of the tunnel to the other. He was going to keep up even if it killed him.

As they advanced down the coal-black tunnel, made barely visible by their hardware, a distant booming noise rattled the brickwork, and a pop of air brushed by them.

Madeleine looked behind her at Petrovitch. He gave her the thumbs-up and pointed ahead. She trod silently on, her long legs allowing her to step on either side of the river.

Then she stopped, keeping perfectly still. Petrovitch slowly lowered himself to a crouch. There was a slight bend in the river, and around it were the first glimmerings of a heat glow.

Her shotgun already had a chambered shell. She already had it up at her shoulder and aimed. All she had to do was lean into the recoil and twitch the trigger.

The sound of the shot was brutally loud in such a confined space, and the figure ahead was just turning away from the sound of Valentina’s tunnel demolition when the solid slug tore through the layer of ballistic mesh and into the flesh and bone beneath.

As the thunder rolled away, the body fell back with a splash. Madeleine listened carefully, and shuffled forward, balancing on the balls of her feet. When she reached the agent, she leaned down and felt for signs of life. There were none, and Petrovitch crept up beside her.

He knew there was some sort of secret Vatican sign language for times like this, but he didn’t know any of it. Instead, he held up a finger, four fingers, made a zero with his index finger and thumb, then pointed down the tunnel. He meant one hundred and forty meters to the vault. She nodded to show she understood, but he had no idea if he’d actually given the correct message.

The tunnel was relatively straight, but there was no sign of another heat source. Valentina could have fortuitously dropped the tunnel roof on someone, or isolated them on the other side of the rock fall. The niche in the wall that held the ladder up to the surface seemed blank.

Assuming five agents to start with, they’d killed one, and neutralized another. One would be left in the short tunnel to the under-tower shaft—to help lower that heavy bomb down—and two to enter the vault and set the bomb.

He wondered what they were waiting for. They had to have the bomb in place by now, and every second that passed was a second less on the countdown. He'd had enough of creeping along: he stood up straight, and started shambling toward the gaping cold hole in the brick, making no pretense at stealth.

He pressed his back against the crumbling wall and patted his pockets. Nothing there. He'd used the stun grenades already, and he didn't think Madeleine had any left either. He'd have to improvise.

"Hey, Yankee," he called, and flinched as a hail of bullets hammered the far side of the tunnel. The soft brick absorbed the impacts, cracking and spalling. The air filled with dust, but save for a few larger fragments of baked clay, he wasn't struck. The firing stopped, the muzzle flashes flickering away like lightning.

Madeleine came up next to him. He couldn't see her eyes, hidden behind the green lenses of her night sights, but he could tell she was appalled at his recklessness. He grinned in the dark.

"Hey," he started, and held up his good hand to his face to protect it from yet more shrapnel. "*Yobany stos,* will you stop that?" He waited for a pause, and tucked his gun in his waistband again.

"What are you doing?" Madeleine hissed.

"Making it up as I go along." He unhooked a sphere from his arm, and primed it. The little green light winked on. "You seen what my singularity bombs do yet? I have. I've seen what they can do to a car. I'm just wondering how much of you there's going to be left to ship back home. I've some airmail envelopes around somewhere. Should be big enough."

Madeleine had ducked down and hidden beneath the lip of the hole, swapping the shotgun for her Vatican special. Petrovitch threw the singularity device through the hole, against the side of the tunnel wall. It bounced out of sight, and started to roll downhill.

There was another storm of noise and light, but this time the bullets weren't directed out at them. They were aimed at the trundling sphere, picking up speed as it rattled and clattered toward the shaft, a spinning green light marking its passage.

Madeleine pushed the pistol above her head and emptied the entire magazine blind, pointing it at all angles into the space beyond.

The air tasted of spent powder and dirt as the final shell case fell with a clink.

"Yes or no?" asked Petrovitch.

Madeleine swapped her empty magazine for a full one. "I'll find out." She dislodged a loose brick from the top of the ragged wall and let it fall at her feet. She retrieved it, and lobbed it inside. No returning fire.

"Yeah, we haven't got time for this." He pulled his automatic and

backed up to the far side of the river culvert, edging up the curve of the wall until he could see down the length of the tunnel all the way to the shaft.

There was a splash of color at the far end, all hot whites and yellows. It showed what looked like a leg, maybe a hand reaching out for the bright-painted stick that could only be a rifle. Petrovitch drew crosshairs on the main mass and fired three times.

Madeleine leaped up and over the wall. The mortally injured man was bundled out, suspended for a moment across the top of the brickwork before toppling into the river.

Petrovitch splashed toward him, then along and over him, using his shoulders and head for purchase to gain enough height. Madeleine reached over and pulled him in.

“You know this is just madness, don’t you?” she told him as he crashed to the floor.

“We’re trying to prevent a bunch of fanatics armed with an atomic bomb from putting a glowing crater in the Freezone. Compared with what we’ve already been through, this counts as sane.” He held his good hand up. “Shall we do it, then? Take revenge for all the ones the Armageddonists got through?”

Her fingers tightened around his wrist and he was dragged upright. “That’s what everyone wants, isn’t it? In their nuclear dreams, they get to stop them, just once.”

She pushed her night-vision goggles up her forehead long enough to kiss him hard on the lips. Then she pushed him behind her, and knelt down to crawl toward the sharp-edged void of the shaft.

32

The singularity bomb was shattered: the resin that had held the warp and weft of the wire had been reduced to a few large fragments with the rest of it turned to pea-sized grit. That meant he had two left, then. Petrovitch and Madeleine sat on opposite sides of the end of the tunnel and looked out over the shaft.

Madeleine checked the rope, which had been tied around the base of the last tunnel support.

"I still don't get what's keeping them." Petrovitch curled his fingers around the haft of a shovel and felt its reassuring, primitive weight. "If it had been me, I'd have blown it by now. There has to be a good reason."

"And you want to exploit it."

"We're not dead yet." He peered over the edge; no mines or tripwires that he could see. He glanced upward again, at the great mass of debris hanging high above their heads.

"If I lower you down, both of us are vulnerable at that point. If they're watching the shaft…" Madeleine studied the vault doors. The stone that had kept them ajar had been kicked aside, and it rested almost shut on the thickness of a fiber-optic cable.

"I need to get down there," he insisted.

"You really think you're going to talk them out of this?"

"I think I should try. It's not over till the Fat Boy sings."

"Sam, I want you to listen to me." She dragged his face around. "They're not going to be dissuaded. They're not just soldiers, they're martyrs. I understand this sort of thing. They're not going to recant; they believe in what they're doing."

"I don't."

"You can't stop them. We can't storm the vault, and they won't come out. They're in there and, whatever it is they're waiting for, anything you say is more likely to make them detonate early, not less." She took the shovel from him and put it to one side. She clasped his now-empty hand in both of her own. "I want a future with you. I don't know where it's going to be or what it is we're going to be doing, but I want it with you. That's never going to happen if we stay here."

"Ireland," he mumbled. "We're supposed to be going to Ireland, set up a Freezone on a long contract. We're citizens—diplomats, even. It's all arranged, everything. Michael is there already; the Irish government in exile have installed a quantum computer in the Cork mission station. That's what we were going to do."

“Then why are we sitting in a cold dark tunnel under the center of what used to be London, trying to protect something that is no longer of any importance, trying to persuade some zealots not to blow themselves up?”

“Because I have to. Because I’ve lived my whole life in fear of the Armageddonists. I’ve done some really shitty things to all kinds of people—good, bad, mad—because I’ve been so very afraid, and I have to show that I can choose to do the right thing, just once. If I stop them, I get to cancel out all the crap I’ve dealt out over the years.” He chewed at his lip. “But mostly because I hate them and what they’ve done to me.”

“The question is, do you hate them more than you love me?” She pressed his hand tighter. “While there was still a chance, then of course we had to try and prevent this, this outrage. We did our very best. We couldn’t have done more. We have all been, at times, utterly magnificent. And it still wasn’t enough. They’ve chosen their path: it’s time for us to choose ours. While we still can.”

Petrovitch rested the back of his head against the tunnel wall and groaned long and loud. “Every time. Every time I play their *yebani* game, they win.”

“Then stop playing. Only an idiot keeps gambling against someone with loaded dice, and you’re not an idiot. Recognize this for what it is: a stitch-up from start to finish. I’m more than willing to die down here with you, but I’d like to be able to look St. Peter in the eye and not have him think me weapons-grade stupid for throwing my life away in such an heroically pointless manner.” She fixed him with her electronically enhanced stare for a moment, before looking at the ground between their legs. “How about it, Sam?”

“I can’t argue with that,” he said. “Everything you say makes perfect sense.”

“But we’re still going to go out like Butch and the Kid, right?”

“No. No we’re not.” He freed his hand and raised her chin. “You’re absolutely right. Fuck them and the horse they rode in on. Plan B.”

“Do we have one?”

“We do now. The vault needs to be properly shut.” He reached for the shovel and presented it to her. “You’re the only one who can do this in time, however much time it is we have left.”

She snatched at the shovel and threw it through the hole, where it clanged hollowly against the rubble at the bottom of the shaft. She wrapped her waist with the rope, and positioned herself on the lip of the drop.

“Watch my back,” she said, and started down.

Petrovitch dragged his pistol out and dared the door to open any

further than the crack it already was. Madeleine reached the bottom, stooped briefly to pick up the shovel and ran to the vault.

The tiny green light glowed in all its lonely glory.

She knelt down and hooked the cable in one hand, and with the other, slipped the blade of the shovel in the gap. She leaned in on the handle, and the perfectly balanced door moved in sympathy.

Someone was waiting, but they wasted their first fusillade into the back of the heavy steel blast door. Sparks illuminated the shaft and Madeleine's crouched form: she turned her face away from the sudden brightness and the angry whine of deflected bullets.

A second later, she brought the shovel down on the cable, cutting it neatly in two. She took the end that led to the computer and gave it a sharp tug. The firing started again, and she pressed herself against the concrete wall.

It fell silent, and she looped the slack cable around the shovel's handle, once, twice, tugged it tight, then threw the whole assembly through the door into the corridor beyond. The result was predictable, but Madeleine rolled across the floor and got her back to the door. She heaved, and the door swung shut, cutting off the crack of rifle fire the instant a seal was made.

The locks hummed, the bolts slid home, and the green light winked red.

"Tell me again why I'm doing this?" she called, panting.

"Because it's a bomb-proof bunker," shouted back Petrovitch. "Now get back up here."

She ran back and took hold of the rope. "You can't possibly be serious."

"Yeah. If we can't stop the explosion, we might be able to stop the fireball breaching the surface."

She pulled hand over hand, and the rope creaked in protest.

"Come on, come on!"

A hand reached over the lip of the hole, and gripped the jagged edge. Sharp stone and iron cut into her palm, but she used the hold all the same. She put her other hand over and flailed for something to hang on to. Petrovitch caught her wrist and jammed his feet against the soft rock, pulling hard.

He felt himself sliding, and her with him. The soles of his boots banged against the outside of the shaft, and he locked his knees. She was still slipping, and he wasn't strong enough to hold her.

The bloodied hand that had inconstant contact with the concrete let go and lashed out. It found the metal ring around his left elbow, and her fingers tightened around it. His arm straightened and stretched. His backbrace took her full weight, and he screwed his eyes tight shut against a moment of excruciating pain before he managed

to block everything.

She got her shoulders through the gap, and let go of him, pushing back on the sides of the hole and heaving herself across the threshold as far as her waist. Impact gel oozed slick down her front.

Madeleine twisted onto her back and lifted her legs in. “Sorry.”

Petrovitch started breathing again. “Get one of the bombs,” he gasped. He was scared to move in case something had been wrenched off.

She reached down and unhooked one of the spheres. “What now?”

“Okay. Get the rope, tie a bucket to the rope, put the bomb in the bucket. Flick the switch on the top, press the button, and drop it down into the shaft. We’ll have about fifteen to twenty seconds to get out of the tunnel.”

She was already pulling the rope up. Petrovitch brought sensation back to his body, and didn’t enjoy the feeling at all. “*Yebani v’rot.*” Something was irrevocably wrong in his arm. It felt dead, numb, like it was someone else’s limb tacked on to his body.

“Get going,” she said, crouched over her task. “I’ll catch you up.”

“I’m going as fast as I can.” He used his good hand to hang on to a tunnel prop and shuffle himself to sitting, coiled his legs and pushed up the slope. It was neither quick, nor elegant.

The bomb clanged into the bucket. She armed the timer and swung the bucket out over the void.

“Is this going to work?”

“It’s all we have.” The closeness of his voice made her turn, the pale green light of her night-vision goggles seeping down her cheeks. “Do it.”

She reached into the bucket, pressed the button, and let the rope slide through her hands, smearing the nylon cord with blood as it zipped by. Then she closed her fists to brake the bomb’s fall. The bucket rattled, and she let it go again, this time forever.

“Go, Sam.”

“I am.” He growled in frustration at his lack of speed. She climbed over him, past him. He got a knee in the guts and her hand on the side of his head. She reached through his T-shirt to take hold of the metal rod running down his spine, and pulled him backward.

The clock in the corner of his eye clicked around to eleven, twelve—they were still in the tunnel, just reaching the brick wall between them and the stream. She picked him up and threw him out with a grunt that ended in a scream. She jumped, pivoted her hips and tumbled out into the water next to him.

Sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, and Petrovitch was starting to think that his bomb was a squib, and it wasn’t going to go off, when up

subtly changed direction. The river water swirled chaotically around him for a moment, and he lifted his head. Something vast and heavy was beginning to move.

"Surface," he said, but Madeleine was already on her feet. With room to maneuver, she put one arm under both of his and across his chest, lifting him clear and dragging him toward the ladder that led up to street level. The low moan of tortured steel rose suddenly to a shriek and there was a distinct snap as a beam failed. The roaring of falling rubble built from that first sound until the air itself was shaking.

The culvert, already weakened by successive impacts, started to collapse. Bricks popped from the roof and fell with a splash, to be joined moments later by their neighbors. Sheets of bricks were peeling away and choking the water.

Madeleine heaved Petrovitch into the alcove, then swarmed up the rusted ladder to the iron manhole cover far above her head, leaving him there as dust filled his lungs and the river swirled around him.

A crescent, a half-moon of light, then a full circle showing clouds and faces. Something hit the black water next to him: the discarded night-vision goggles, then it was her, splashing down beside him.

"Can you climb?"

"Even if it kills me." He hooked his good hand around the side of the ladder and she helped his foot onto the lowest rung.

Petrovitch swung his hand above his head, latched on, stepped up, and repeated the process, standing as close in to the ladder as he could so that he didn't fall too far outward every time he changed his grip.

The air around him was gray, and the noise like a full-throated bellow from a Jihad-constructed giant robot. His head rose above the pavement, half expecting to see some giant mechanical insect thrashing its way across the city.

Hands dipped down to seize him, haul him up, sit him down.

Valentina knelt in front of him. "Did you stop them?"

"No." He hawked up the dust from his lungs and spat it down on the flagstones. "We have to run."

Madeleine crawled out. Her head was cut, blood seeping down her scalp and around her ear. The rest of her face was caked in dark dust, as was her armor. Only her eyes were white. He realized that he would look just the same.

Valentina's only response to Petrovitch's answer was "How far?"

He didn't know for sure.

"Michael?"

[Welcome back.]

"Yeah, yeah. We screwed up. Assume you've got a one-kiloton demolition nuke in your vault and I've just dropped the remains of the Oshicora Tower down the access shaft." He tried to get up, and inexplicably missed the ground. He was caught and held: Madeleine on one side, Tabletop on the other. "Any chance of containment?"

[There are complex, unknown variables…]

"I'm asking you to guess. And I need an estimate on damage and fallout concentration. I'd do it myself, but I'll be busy trying to stay alive."

They had no cars, no trucks, nothing. They had to do it by foot, or not at all.

[Head north or west. Complete structural failure of buildings not designed for earthquakes is likely up to five hundred meters from ground zero. Containment is possible—I assign a likelihood of fifty percent—but if the fireball reaches the surface, blast and thermal damage will result. Fallout will spread south and east over the Metrozone, promptly lethal and decreasing to below lethal after forty-eight hours.]

"*Chyort*. Tell the Metrozone. Sound the alarms." He was vaguely aware that he was in a stumbling, falling, dragging run, supported on either side. They were heading toward Berkeley Square. Boots clattered on the road, but no one spoke. Everyone was saving their breath for something more important.

Across the river, the ancient sirens started to wail, a tone that rose and fell, putting cold, hard fear into every heart.

It was almost half an hour since a tipped-over camera had recorded the fleeting images of men running past. Almost. Less than two minutes to go.

Of course: they'd armed the bomb outside, breaking open the code keys, verifying them with their commander-in-chief, setting the timer. Thirty minutes to be on the safe side, cope with the unexpected, place it as close as possible to the anathema that was Michael—and discovering that they could get into the same room as the quantum computer, realizing that they could have just put a magazine full of bullets through the machine but still had to contend with a clock that was counting down and was impossible to stop, a clock attached to a small nuclear bomb that was going to have to detonate, no matter what, when the counter reached zero.

It was inevitable.

He imagined them, sitting in the dark of the vault, just the scattered blue-green glow of chemical lights and each other for company. And that bastard bomb, electronic numbers flickering what remained of their lives away.

He was glad it was them, and not him, even though his own lungs

burned like they were filled with acid, every muscle was made of agony, every step an effort too great, every moment a conscious torment. He was alive, and if he got far enough away from ground zero, he'd stay alive.

Not like them. Not like them at all.

33

They'd reached the far end of Berkeley Square—an oval of dead trees and brown grass—when Petrovitch felt the first signs. His eyes were momentarily filled with white noise, and the computer he was relying on to keep him going stuttered.

He fell, his sudden rigidity tearing him from the grasp of his bearers. As he went down, the shock front traveling through the ground brought it up to meet him. Hard. He was suddenly flying, and an enormous roaring filled his ears.

His vision cleared. He was on his back, facing the way he'd come, and a wave was rolling toward him, made of tarmac and concrete and soil. It lifted the road like it was the surface of the sea, and it lifted the buildings like they were ships catching the tide.

As they rose, they gave out shrieks and screams—but remained more or less intact. As the crest of the wave passed underneath, and the ground started to fall away again, cracks tore through the facades: roofs kept on rising while the masonry below separated out along great fissures that opened up. Glass snapped, brick broke along the ageing mortar, stone broke in two.

The wave hit Petrovitch, and he was airborne again. The building behind him at the head of the square leaned away from him, and then started to collapse in on itself.

A whole train of shocks chewed their way through the streets, and, partially obscured by the pall of pulverized city, a vast black dome of subsurface rock blossomed above the vault. Its skin was marked by flecks of road, of lamp-posts, of concrete and plastic panels and brightly colored carpet.

The great bulge threatened to burst, to spew its fireball out into the air and drag hot contaminated dust with it, where it would be caught by the wind and darken the sky even further. Orange fire glittered through the veil of debris, barely constrained.

It hung there, supported from inside by an incandescent cloud trying to pull free of the ground, perfectly balanced against the hauling back of gravity.

Then it started to sink: the fire held in it began to die, turning from fierce light to glowing ember. As it flattened, it spread, a fresh storm of rolling dust climbing over and around the falling buildings, punching out walls and windows.

By the time it reached Petrovitch, it was a gritty slap in the face, weak and growing weaker. The skyline around him was lost. The air became opaque. The noise of splitting and cracking and crumbling

gradually lessened, and finally dropped to a level where shouting and coughing and retching could be heard.

He couldn't talk. His mouth, dry as the desert, seemed to have set half-open. He could barely see: his eyeballs were scratched and pitted, and he'd run out of tears. He blinked, and it felt as if he was trying to dislodge boulders. His nose and ears were clogged, and his lungs spasmed at his efforts to breathe.

And he had no connection: not just no signal, but no sign of a signal.

There was a man to his left, one of Valentina's volunteers, who slowly rose up on his hands and knees. There was blood in his mouth, dribbling down the cake-white dust on his skin. His stare was wild and uncomprehending.

Petrovitch found enough spit to loosen his tongue. "*Pizdets.*" He looked up and around, peering through the haze. Shadows played as the air thickened and thinned on the wind.

"Sam? Sam!"

"Here," he managed to croak, before his throat tightened and he coughed hard enough to break ribs.

Madeleine stumbled toward him, and sat in a heap at his side. Any movement stirred more dust into the air. She put out her hand and rested it over his heart, just to feel the hum of the turbine beneath his skin.

There was blood in his phlegm, and he wiped his mouth with his sleeve. Still not dead, then. He circled his finger to encompass all of them, and pointed north. She nodded, and started to bring the others to him, to sit them down and get them to wait.

She found Valentina, whose dark hair had turned white and stiff, her tightly belted jacket hanging open, her blouse missing buttons, cuts to her stomach and her legs, her trousers ragged. Petrovitch put his arm around her shoulders, but she didn't react.

Madeleine found the other volunteers, with their breaks and lacerations and bruises and punctures. Her impact armor had protected her where mere skin and bone had failed.

She found Tabletop last of all, wandering in the fog, and took her arm and led her back to the rest of the group.

"They did it. They did it," mumbled Tabletop. She looked at Petrovitch. "They did it."

"Yeah. They did." He hawked up more slurry. "We need to get cleaned up. Everyone stay together. No one gets left behind."

He disentangled himself from Valentina, and used her shoulder to stand. His leg tried to fold under him, and he forced it to straighten. When he looked down, there was something sticking out of his calf. It was too big to be called a splinter—he'd been impaled by a pencil-

width shard of wood that was going to cause more damage coming out than it had going in.

His left arm was still numb. He touched it with his right, pinched the skin roughly. Nothing. It seemed to be the least of his problems; at least it didn't hurt anymore.

He limped away, heading toward the gap between the shrouded mountains of masonry that should have been the road heading toward Oxford Street. The buildings on either side had shed their fronts and exposed their rooms. Chimneys had barged through roofs and fallen through floors.

The destruction gripped him with a cold, studied fury. They'd only just cleaned up after the Jihad and the Outies. The scars of the earlier missile strikes were isolated. This had ripped a crater in the historic center of the city, erasing landmark after landmark, spewing poison into the air he was being forced to breathe and contaminating the ground he walked on.

He slipped and slid on a drift of rubble, climbed to the top, stumbled down the far side. The heavy particles in the cloud surrounding him were falling like rain, and the sky began to brighten. The tops of broken buildings peered down at him, misaligned and jagged. There were cracks in the road, too, where water seeped out as springs and puddled in the gutters. Sewers had failed, bending the road surface down in some places, and in others leaving gaping holes that brimmed with darkness.

They navigated all the hazards in their path, even when post-explosion settling caused something close by to come crashing down. There'd always be a warning noise first, a tremor in the ground. Enough time to back off or run forward, out of the path of the slow tumble of bricks and timber, of stone and steel.

A signal: Petrovitch hooked himself up to the connection, and called for help. "Hey."

[Your capacity for survival surprises even me. How injured are you?]

"We're all pretty much hosed. Call it fifteen barely walking wounded. I don't know how hot we are—we could be dead already."

[There is a decontamination station being set up at the Marylebone entrance to the Oxford Street mall. Make your way there.]

"Tell me about the damage."

[From the relays we have lost, buildings have been either completely or partially demolished for a radius of seven hundred and fifty meters from the origin. Some inside have survived, some outside have not. No significant damage has occurred beyond one thousand two hundred meters. Buckingham Palace is in ruins, the Westminster embankment is breached, and the old Parliament is flooding. The

temporary bridge at Lambeth has been destroyed.]

"Ah, *chyort.* And we were doing so well."

The mall, so carefully reglazed after the devastation wreaked on it by the Paradise militia, was a sea of bright crystal under a span of naked girders. The empty spaces behind the blank shop fronts were a jumble of fallen ceiling tiles and swaying light fittings.

[You should know that you are currently presumed dead. The EU has summarily revoked all visas to U.S. passport holders, all diplomatic staff are being expelled, and all U.S. assets are frozen. The Union government will be in emergency session from eighteen hundred hours. What is to be your response?]

"My response, or the Freezone's response?"

[Are they not the same?]

"Yeah. They'll get it soon enough." The exit to Marylebone Lane was just ahead and, as promised, a large white tent had been set up just beyond the doors. Vans emblazoned with red crosses were parked behind, and figures in white suits and respirators were waiting for them.

Petrovitch wasn't looking forward to this. He stepped up first, partly because it was his job to lead, but mostly because he just wanted to get it over with.

The decontamination team was working two streams: while he was screened with radiation detectors, Tabletop was pushed shivering into the other lane. The counters clicked lazily as they were turned on, then when held close to his body, started to chatter and buzz.

One of the medics ripped the seal on a sterilized packet of surgical scissors. "Sorry, Doctor Petrovitch," he said, and started to cut his way through Petrovitch's clothing from neck to groin. He repeated the action on the back, then started on each leg.

His exoskeleton needed to come off, too and, fortunately, someone had a tool kit with the right-sized wrench. The batteries strapped to his body were snipped free: the tape that held them in place was ripped off, leaving red weals across his chalk-white skin. They tried to take his computer from him, too, but that was a non-negotiable. It went inside a plastic bag, knotted around the cable, and he held tightly on to it.

Naked now, apart from his boots. The laces were cut, and he stepped out of them, then each sock in turn. While his clothes were bagged up in bright yellow polythene, he was screened again.

The radiation was lower this time, but there was something in his right eye, an embedded particle of a short-lived radionuclide.

"It'll have to come out, I'm afraid."

"Yeah. Figured." He kept on looking dead ahead, but in the corner of his vision, Tabletop was being treated in the same gentle but

thorough manner. Scissors hadn't been able to cut her stealth suit, so she'd had to climb out of it. She was as exposed as he was, and it only ever felt wretched and frightening.

The medic opened up some sterile forceps, and slid the ends around Petrovitch's eyeball. He tightened his grip, twisted through a right angle, and the device disengaged with a click.

It went in the bag with his clothes.

He was checked again. No more hot spots. He was ushered forward and into the tent, and the next man in line replaced him.

His wounds were dressed. The stick in his leg was cut out and checked for radiation, then the torn skin was sewn shut and covered with a waterproof bandage. The holes in his broken arm were more of a problem.

"Just leave it," said Petrovitch. "I'm going to lose it anyway."

The shower was neither hot nor cold, but the water was at least plentiful. He couldn't wash himself, and had to submit to the ministrations of another. Across the tent from him, behind a screen and under another shower unit, Tabletop scrubbed herself down.

He gargled and spat. Repeatedly. He blew his nose and had it irrigated with dilute peroxide. His ears were reamed. The sponges went into another yellow bag, but the water just drained away.

They screened him again, passed him as being good enough, and moved him up the line. The next anonymous medic took his blood—more than Petrovitch thought strictly necessary—and neatly labeled the filled phials by hand.

He was issued with a white coverall, hospital slippers, and a red blanket. The last in line held up the tent flap for him, and he shuffled into the daylight.

A man in green scrubs was sitting in the back of one of the vans. He had an electric boiler running. He lifted a mug up and waggled it.

"Cup of tea, sir?"

If Petrovitch had had any tears left, he would have cried.

"Coffee? Tell me you have coffee."

"Certainly, sir."

It came freeze-dried out of a packet, and he had two in the same mug. It was hot, and strong, and tasted like angels dancing in his mouth. He sat on the back step of the van and was joined by Tabletop, who was soon nursing her own drink.

"They did it," she said.

"I know. I did what I could. It was almost enough." He sipped more of the scalding brew. "It could have been a lot worse."

"How?" She squeezed water from her hair and let it dribble on the ground.

"We didn't lose anyone. Sure, we have a *yebani* great crater and

kilometer of crap radiating from it. We can just shovel the dirt back in and pat it down, but we can't replace people. And look, they missed. They missed Michael, and they missed me. Everything they wanted to achieve, they didn't."

"They used a nuke, Sam."

"Yeah. Finally, they've made a mistake. Your lot." And he shrugged. "Okay, not your lot anymore. They're good. A couple of times, we've had luck on our side, but this is the first time they've really screwed up. We had cameras at ground zero. We've got video of two reporters being shot, and if there's one thing even the most partisan journo hates, it's someone deliberately killing another journo. We've got global sympathy."

"I don't want sympathy," she said baldly. "I want revenge."

"Oh, we'll get it all right. But it might not look how you want it to." He glanced across at her with his one eye. "You prepared for that?"

Unperturbed by his empty socket, she looked back. "What are you going to do?"

He scratched at his nose and smiled slyly. "Something… wonderful."

34

A phone rang. It was an ancient phone still attached to a copper wire, and no matter the degree of sophistication that was plugged into the back of it, the phone itself hadn't been changed for thirty years.

It had been originally installed to prevent wars. That was its sole purpose and, so far as the potential combatants were concerned, it had worked. Until now.

A man—a junior functionary whose job description was to make sure important people had everything they needed—was alone in the room when the phone rang. He had a brief moment of panic, and he shouted for help, before recovering enough to pick the receiver up and hold it to his ear.

"Hello?"

"Yeah, you're not President Mackensie."

"No sir. My name's Armstrong. Joe Armstrong."

"Well, Armstrongjoearmstrong, I'm Samuil Petrovitch, and your boss has just nuked my city. To say I'm just a little cross about that would be an understatement, but I'm kind of assuming that your president couldn't give a fuck about that. Unfortunately for him, I've made it my job to make him care. So, Joe—you're a pretty straight-up sort of guy, yeah? I can trust you to pass on a message. Can you do that for me, Joe?"

"Yes." Armstrong was having trouble breathing. "I can do that."

"The message is this: I want to talk to Mackensie, and I won't go away until I do."

Petrovitch heard the handset being placed on the table. He had no doubt that it was a solid slab of antique wood, highly polished and clutter-free.

It was quiet for a few moments, then he could hear voices approaching. Armstrong was one, and there were others. They seemed anxious.

The phone was picked up again, and an older voice spoke. It was one that was used to both issuing and obeying orders.

"This is Admiral Malcolm Arendt of the United States Navy. Who is this, and how did you access this system?"

"Didn't Joe say? I had such high hopes for him, too. Or is the problem with you, Admiral? Maybe Joe did say, and you didn't believe him because you thought my atoms were floating around in the atmosphere somewhere over France."

A hand muffled the mouthpiece, and the admiral called out to the rest of his audience. "It's Petrovitch."

"That's what I've been telling you. Now, you're not Mackensie either. They're all in the Situation Room, right? You can patch this call through—I'd do it myself, but why should I do all the work?"

"President Mackensie does not talk to terrorists."

"Can I remind you who just toppled Nelson's Column? It's lying there across Trafalgar Square, and Nelson's head has come off. That picture is currently running on every news network on the planet. Even your own. If I can stomach talking to Mackensie, he can have the grace to sit his scrawny arse down and talk to me."

"President Mackensie does not talk to terrorists. I do not talk to terrorists. No one in this administration talks to terrorists."

"Fine. You don't want to know how your country dies. I can understand that."

"I… what?"

"Not only did you not get me, you didn't get Michael," said Petrovitch.

"Michael?"

"The AI. It has a name: Michael. That's who you've been trying to kill; the same Michael that the Vatican are about to declare to be alive. Not that you care about that any more than you did when you thought it was just a machine. Sorry, I've distracted myself. Me and Michael: between us, we've decided that you're just too dangerous to have around anymore, and the world would be a better place without a bunch of nuclear-armed fundamentalist xenophobic psychopaths. Sorry it had to turn out this way, but hey."

"You're threatening to destroy the United States of America. You and whose army?"

"Yeah. The last time someone said that to me, I surprised them by turning up with, you know, a whole army. Prepare for the New Machine Jihad, Admiral."

"We can deal with the AI, Petrovitch," said Arendt. "We can deal with you, too. Now get off this line."

"Just one more thing, Admiral. If you isolate your network now, the virus routines we've installed across your country's infrastructure will no longer be able to talk to Michael. If that happens, they'll turn off every computer they're hiding in, and I'm sure you know just how difficult it is to get these things restarted once they go down. You'll lose everything, for a very long time. You'll be reduced to the nickels and dimes in your pocket."

"Anarchy. You're talking about Anarchy."

"Modified. So hold off on your kill switch. Of course, you'll want to check if I'm bluffing: but I did the same thing to the Freezone earlier on today, and if you can find anyone who'll still talk to you after what you've done, they'll confirm the sudden and total

shutdown. I had an AI to help me clear up my mess, though, so I imagine your pain will last an awful lot longer than ours did. Years, probably. How are the NSA doing at clearing up the last outbreak, by the way?"

There seemed to be a lot of people running in the background, running and talking hurriedly over phones. Of course, they were trying to trace him: that exercise was doomed to failure, but he'd have been disappointed if they hadn't tried. Some of the conversations were about activating assets within the Metrozone: again, the likelihood he'd accounted for every CIA agent didn't come with a cast-iron guarantee.

Some of the discussions were more technical—how he had hijacked the satellites involved and how they could take them back—but most of them were just shouting commands to check every piece of software anything important depended on.

"What do you want, Petrovitch?" growled Arendt.

"I told Joe, and now I'm telling you. I want to talk to Mackensie, and, while I'm on, the rest of the National Security Council. Right now, you have a choice: we can go to war, or we can talk."

Admiral Arendt gave his considered response. "We don't talk to terrorists."

"Is that your final offer? You don't even want to tell Mackensie what I told you? Let him decide?"

The phone went dead.

Petrovitch gave it a few moments, and rang again.

It was answered immediately. It was neither young Armstrong, nor old Arendt. "Brandon Harris."

The call had been taken in the Situation Room. Because Michael had already hacked the cameras attached to all the workstations around the periphery of the room, and the one aimed down the length of the long central table, Petrovitch could finally see his adversary.

The president was at the far end, his thin white skin barely covering the outline of his skull. He leaned back in his leather chair, almost amused by the tension around him.

"*Dobre den,* Secretary Harris. Have I got your attention yet?"

Over the background clamor, a sound familiar to the entire globe cut through: a gravelly throat-clearing. President Mackensie was about to speak.

"Go to Defcon one."

"NORAD have just told us they've detected multiple launches from sites in Russia, China and off both our eastern and western seaboards." Harris leaned in on the phone. "What have you done?"

"Me? What have I done? You might think it's only one lousy nuke in some shit-hole European city, but the rest of the planet seems to

disagree. You might want to put me on the speakers now."

He didn't. He put the phone on mute and turned to the table and those seated around it. "Mister President. Petrovitch wants to speak to you."

"And what would be the purpose of that, Mister Harris? That boy is a potty-mouthed heathen liar, and we should have dealt with him a long time ago rather than leaving that to others."

"That boy has just coordinated a massive first-strike against us."

"He is not the cause of this." Mackensie sat up and raised his gaze to the video screens: satellites were tracking rocket plumes rising high into the atmosphere. All the trails were beginning to bend toward the North American continent. From the Steppes, from the Asian deserts, from the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, lines were beginning to describe the writing on the wall. He spoke in his measured preacher's voice. "Our enemies have been waiting for this moment for decades, but we will not be cowed: let them pour out the goblets of wrath they have stored for us. God is our mighty fortress."

Admiral Arendt took his seat at the table. "Mister President, SkyShield is ready."

"Then you may proceed." Mackensie watched intently as the tracking stations began to lock on to their targets. Each incoming missile blinked from red to yellow as it was matched with an orbital weapon.

Then to blue.

"Sir. That's…" Arendt slid backward on his wheeled seat toward one of the workstation personnel. "That's just not possible."

Mackensie tapped his lips with a bony finger. All the highest missiles were blue, and more were cycling through the colors as they rose. "Malcolm, there appears to be a problem."

Arendt was dividing his precious time between receiving information and regurgitating it. "SkyShield components are tagging the inbound birds as friendly." He stopped again to listen to the whispering voice in his ear. "We can't shoot them down."

There was silence in the room. All the assumed confidence gained from having a massive space-based missile defense system, backed up with ground stations and some really big lasers, drained away with an almost audible sucking noise.

"How," said Mackensie eventually, "could this happen?"

Harris slowly turned in his seat at the long table and looked at the abandoned phone lying next to one of the consoles. "Petrovitch."

"Explain." Mackensie gazed with his hooded eyes at the arcs of oncoming missiles. "We are supposed to have the most secure network of any government. Are you telling me now that it is not? Frank?"

The National Security Adviser seemed temporarily paralyzed.

“Mister O’Connell, your president requires your opinion. Be so good as to provide it.”

O’Connell’s skin was gray, like he was already dead. “We know the AI is able to insert itself in command and control structures: it’s done it before. SkyShield—all our systems, in fact—may have been compromised. Even with the protocols we’ve put in place, it looks like it’s not enough.” He shrugged helplessly, and his hands trembled. “We did our best.”

“Then we close our electronic borders. Restart SkyShield.”

“All the reports I have tell me that our infrastructure is mostly or completely infected with an Anarchy-variant virus. Petrovitch says if we cut the AI off, we bankrupt the country. And there’s no guarantee that we would have a working computer to be able to get a command to SkyShield afterward.” O’Connell spoke very quietly, and the microphones strained to pick him up. “Just like that. It’s all over.”

Harris snatched up the phone and unmuted it. “You… you’ve left us defenseless.”

“How does it feel now, you bastard? Mackensie didn’t cook up this nonsense on his own. He doesn’t get to suffer alone. Put me on the speakers.”

“You’re killing us. Not just Mackensie, not just the American people. Everyone, everywhere. You know what’s going to happen next?”

“Yeah. You get down on your knees and beg to Michael. After the shit you’ve put him through, it’s the least you can do.”

“The president will order the launch of our own missiles.”

“Or you could do that. Seems a little drastic, don’t you think?”

Harris’ grip on the phone was threatening to crack the plastic. “Drastic? We are under attack.”

“Are you? Are you really?”

Harris paused, then said: “Petrovitch, is the United States under attack?”

“Well, now. On the one hand, you can detect hundreds of missiles and thousands of warheads, all heading straight for you. On the other hand, what you’re seeing could be what we want you to see.”

“And how are we supposed to tell the difference?”

“You know the answer to that question already, Harris. Hit the kill switch and pray to whichever god you worship that the missiles disappear. Or you could let me talk to the president.”

Harris cupped his hand over the phone. “Mister President: Petrovitch has implied that this is an AI simulation, and no missiles have been launched.” He sounded like a man offered the hope of reprieve at the foot of the gallows. He actually grinned.

“Then what,” asked Mackensie, his expression sour, “are those?”

He waved his hand at the screens in front of him, that told him only of the end of the world. “Are we to take the word of some punk street kid over our own satellites?”

Harris’ grin slipped away. He glanced at O’Connell for support, who pinched the bridge of his nose hard enough to leave white marks.

“It’s possible… Mister President; the Chinese have no reason to launch. Russia has no reason to launch. The EU—what are they going to get out of this? It makes no sense. Brazen it out, sir. All we need to do is absolutely nothing.”

“Nothing? We have failed to destroy the artificial intelligence. We have failed to neutralize Petrovitch. We have failed to prevent SkyShield from being sabotaged. We have failed to protect our own network from infection. How much less would you like the government of the United States of America to do?”

“He’s provoking us.” Harris thrust the phone in Mackensie’s direction, and lost it, caught between terror and duty. “Petrovitch is playing us. God damn it, what if none of this is real?”

“That’ll be twenty bucks, Mister Harris. I’ll have it taken out of your final pay check. You are relieved of your position.” Mackensie steepled his fingers, showing the liver spots on the backs of his hands, and glanced up at his aide. “Please escort the former Secretary of Defense from the Situation Room.”

He watched impassively as Harris was ushered from the room at gunpoint. The other men present watched, pale and drained.

“It is perfectly clear that Petrovitch wishes us dead, and will do or say anything that will delay our own launch until we are no longer in a position to retaliate effectively. I refuse to listen to such counsel. The way ahead is clear: we do this by the book.”

A man with a briefcase stepped up beside Mackensie, and laid it on the table. He opened it up and passed his president a solid plastic rectangle as big as a postcard. Mackensie flexed his fingers and cracked the plastic slab along pre-scored lines. Inside was a long strip of paper, printed with a combination of numbers and letters in a long sequence.

He laid the codes on the table in front of him. “The first and greatest duty a government has is to protect the integrity of the nation it serves. If that has been denied to us, then our last act ought properly be to strike out against a world bent on destroying us, as it has been since our creation. We will not go quietly as they hope, but we will fight even as we die.”

He cleared his throat again and readied himself to read.

35

Admiral Arendt looked at the glowing lines on the wall screens. The first missiles would be hitting the Alaskan airbases in less than thirty seconds. “Get me Elmendorf,” he said to the watch officer.

The officer slid back to his console and with two presses of his touch screen, had the duty desk. “This is the NSC. Ah, sheet three-five yellow. Seven Alpha Foxtrot November Niner Papa Lima Zero.”

The man in the blue uniform riffled through the yellow pad in front of him. “Elmendorf. Romeo Bravo Six Kilo Eight Juliet Tango Six Hotel.”

The watch officer ran his finger along the second line of code. “Admiral? Connection to Elmendorf confirmed. At least, it looks that way.”

Arendt leaned over the younger man’s shoulder. “Hello, son. I need you just to stay on this line as long as you can.”

“Yes sir.”

The screen went blank, then reverted to the previous window. On the main map, Elmendorf winked from blue to gray, followed a moment later by Eielson.

Snatching up the abandoned handset, Arendt spoke through clenched teeth. “Petrovitch, tell me we haven’t just lost the Eleventh Air Force.”

“You haven’t lost the Eleventh Air Force. Neither are you about to lose the western seaboard. Scary though, isn’t it? Can you smell the fear yet?”

“You have to stop this. The president is releasing the launch codes.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Can he launch?” asked Arendt. “If this is fake, then he’s not really giving the codes to NORAD, is he?”

“No,” said Petrovitch, “he’s giving them to me.”

Arendt dropped the phone. “Mister President, stop the sequence.”

Mackensie turned his head slowly toward his military adviser and fixed him with a withering stare. “Malcolm, I think you forget yourself.”

“That’s not NORAD,” said the admiral, his finger wavering toward the screen where a smart air force officer was waiting on the last two digits of the launch code. “That’s the AI. You’re telling the enemy the gold codes.”

The first brief flicker of doubt crossed Mackensie’s serene face. He looked down the table at his advisers and their attendants. Some of them were just kids, who’d grown up knowing nothing but

Reconstruction. The middle-aged ones were the generation who'd voted for its institution. Even the old men were two decades his junior.

The sub-launched missiles from the Atlantic reached the eastern seaboard. New York went offline. Miami. Charleston. Some crossed the coast and tracked inland, heading for the industrial cities of the north.

The land-launched intercontinental rockets had ended their boost phase, and were coasting at the edge of space. They'd start to fall in twenty minutes' time. Every major center of population had been targeted, as had the major military bases. Hawaii was about to succumb. Diego Garcia would be next. Without SkyShield's protection, they were naked to the oncoming storm.

O'Connell grimaced. "I know it looks like NORAD. But we have to consider the capabilities of who—of what—we're up against. If Petrovitch's AI is running a simulated attack, it's running everything."

"Well, Frank: you're my intelligence adviser. I had hoped you of all people would be able to say whether or not the intelligence we are receiving is reliable."

"Either we use the kill switch, or we wait and see if we die. They're the only ways."

"The choice between wiping out our economy or our ability to hit back is not a choice at all." Mackensie stretched his thin lips out. "I appear to have been badly advised."

O'Connell started to protest. "Ever since we learned of the New Machine Jihad…"

Mackensie held up his hand. "Enough. You are relieved of your position also."

After resting his head briefly on the table, O'Connell stood up and walked in a daze to the exit. His deputy licked his lips nervously and scraped his fingers through his hair.

"Does anyone," asked Mackensie mildly, "have anything constructive to say at this stage, or shall we continue?"

"I think, sir," said Admiral Arendt, "you should speak with Petrovitch."

"Do you, Malcolm?"

"Yessir."

The missiles were edging closer. Two of the sub-launched missiles, one from the east, one from the west, were converging on Colorado.

"And what would be the purpose of that? Why would I waste a moment conversing with the author of our destruction." Mackensie gestured at the wall screens. "We spent trillions of dollars and millions of man-hours on Project SkyShield, only to have it rendered useless by

him and his abomination. We face either nuclear destruction or total economic disaster. Both will leave our great nation a shattered remnant of its former self and our enemies intact. I will not permit that."

The west coast had gone. The east coast, too. Targets well beyond the continental divide were falling one by one, and still the main attack hadn't arrived.

The admiral tilted his head slightly as he tried to glean information from the maps, desperately sifting through the layers to sort fact from fabrication. "I'll be damned," he said.

"Twenty dollars, if you please, Malcolm. Not like you at all: I appreciate we're about to meet our maker, but please keep your composure."

"Why aren't they targeting DC?" Arendt got to his feet and walked around to the foot of the table. He pointed up at the map with all its lines and markers. "We should have been hit by now. Decapitation strike."

The watch officer eyed the telephone on his desk, then picked it up. "Petrovitch?" he hissed. "Why aren't we dead yet?"

"Because if a missile had struck you and you were all still alive, you'd know for certain, wouldn't you? Even Mackensie couldn't convince himself you were still under attack. So we thought we'd string this out as long as possible and make you sweat. Not nice, is it, taking away a person's ability to tell what's real?"

"As one human being to another, I'm begging you to end this."

"You're convinced, then? That none of this is actually happening?"

"Yes. I'm convinced."

"Then do something to stop Mackensie giving me the complete launch codes. We've got most of it: Michael might be able to guess the rest, but it'll take him a while. Much easier to let your president hand control of your nuclear deterrent to me on a plate. Much more ironic, too."

"What can I do? I'm just… just a cog."

"So were Stanislav Petrov and Vasili Arkhipov, but they were the right people in the right place at the right time, and they stopped a third World War. What's your name, *kamerad*?"

"Joshua Meldon Junior, sir."

"You can call me Sam, Joshua. I like you. Why don't you turn around and take a look at what's happening behind you."

Arendt was still standing under the screens showing the virtual destruction of his country, arguing that he was right, and that to speak the last two characters of the launch code would be a disaster. The depleted audience was with him: the Secretary of State, the Chief of

Staff, the Deputy Security Adviser and the other two deputies, all willing the president to change his mind.

The admiral's case was plain. "The White House is a primary target on every conceivable attack pattern of a foreign power. We have not been hit—yet—and neither has any target within a hundred miles. Mister President, an atom bomb in Virginia would rattle the windows in the Oval Office. There are no independently verifiable signs that we have been attacked because we have not actually been attacked."

Mackensie looked above Arendt's head, seeking both clarity and certainty. He watched the missile tracks close in on NORAD's mountain fastness.

"I am the President of the United States of America and Commander-in-Chief of her armed forces. The reason I am in this great office of state, after long years of faithful service to this nation and her peoples, is to be here at this time and this place, to take this decision. When all others fall by the wayside and show themselves unworthy of the responsibilities handed to them by Almighty God, I will not falter. I will set my face like flint in the face of my many adversities and remain faithful to the very end." Mackensie picked up the gold codes and looked to the screen that held the image of the ever-patient airforce officer, waiting for the complete sequence.

"Sir?" said Joshua Meldon Junior into the sudden silence. "My brother works for the USGS."

"That's nice, son, but not now."

"He's in Colorado. They have seismometers, sir. And I can verify it's really him."

Arendt gestured to Meldon to make the call.

"Niner Zulu," said Mackensie.

"The launch codes have been authenticated," said the man at NORAD and saluted crisply. "It was an honor serving under you, sir."

"Would that others did their duty as diligently as you, son." The screen went blank, and was replaced by a list of the counterstrike assets as they were activated. Mackensie folded his arms, as if he had known this day would come and he had spent a lifetime preparing himself for it. "Thank you, gentlemen. There is nothing else left to do, and you are all dismissed."

None of them moved.

Meldon adjusted his mouth mic. "I need to speak to Doctor Jerry Meldon. I don't care if he's in a meeting: this is the White House and this is urgent." While he waited, he picked up Petrovitch's phone again.

"You'll go far," said Petrovitch.

"I'm too late, though, aren't I?"

“Hell yeah. All your base are belong to us.”

“What are you going to do with them? The codes, I mean?”

“Enjoy them while I’ve got them. They go out of date at midnight, so they have a short shelf-life. I thought I might post them on some public message boards, see if they go viral.”

“Hey Josh. ’S’up?”

Meldon put the phone back down on the corner of his workstation. His brother didn’t sound like a man monitoring the end of everything.

“Jerry, listen very carefully to me. Have you detected any nuclear weapons detonations in the continental United States?”

“What’s going on, Josh? Are you in some kind of trouble?”

“Just answer the question: yes or no?”

“No! I mean, really no.”

“Or anywhere else?”

“Haven’t you seen the news? Of course you have. Why are you asking me this stuff?”

Meldon screwed his eyes tight shut. “Jerry, what was the name of the first girl you kissed?”

“I… don’t get it.”

Swallowing hard, Meldon tried again. “Third grade. Who did you kiss in third grade?”

“You said you’d never…”

“You don’t know how important this is, Jerry. I need to make sure that it’s you I’m talking to. I’ve got what’s left of the National Security Council staring at me, including the president. Which girl did you kiss in third grade? I caught you and you made me swear I’d never tell, on our mother’s life.”

The missiles were very close to Colorado now. By the rules of the game, if they hit, the connection would disappear.

“Jerry. Which girl?”

“You know damn well it wasn’t a g—”

Meldon cut him off. “Mister President. The United States Geological Survey has not detected a single detonation anywhere within the world, except for the one we caused.”

The two markers converged on NORAD. It winked out.

“Have we launched?” Arendt walked slowly around the table to Meldon’s workstation. He picked up the phone. “Petrovitch, have we launched?”

“Why don’t you put me on the speakers, Admiral?”

“You don’t need me to put you on the speakers, do you? You never have. You’re as good as in this room with us.”

The main screens flickered. The screen changed to inside a rusting container. Faces looked back at them. A teenage girl; two young

women, one very tall with a bandaged cut on her partly shaved head, the other a pale and drawn blue-eyed redhead who stared belligerently and raised her middle finger to the camera; it panned over another woman, high cheekboned and disdainful, then they were out in the daylight. There were more containers, strewn seemingly at random, and as the camera wobbled and bounced along in time with the gait of the carrier, the watchers could see compacted brown clay and cloud-laden sky.

"This city has been my home for the last few years. The London Metrozone took me in and sheltered me after I'd run from all the bad things I'd done. I became anonymous here: easy enough to do. Then it got a bit, well, screwed up. Firstly, the New Machine Jihad: a burgeoning AI's subconscious dreams played out across reality. That, and your CIA, put a hole in the cordon. The Outies came through. It was a trickle at first, then it was a flood. We ended up having a war, and we only just won. Now we have this: lies and subterfuge, more death and destruction, and you've finally done what the Armageddonists failed to do: put a nuclear bomb in the heart of London."

He was at the gates of Regent's Park, looking up at the sniper's vantage point, showing them first-hand how damaged it was. "The strange thing is that each time I was no more than lucky. I was able to get in the way, just enough to make a difference. But I'm not doing that again: I'm done here. I'm tired. I'm going to disappear off your radar—hopefully permanently—and this time I'm going to leave this mess for you to clear up. And let's face it, it is your mess."

Petrovitch kept walking. There were few people still around: most of them had moved north away from ground zero. The street was littered with red flags, reminding him of that brief moment of euphoria, where change had not just seemed possible but inevitable.

"So I've got another of your CIA agents—I'm not talking about Tabletop, she's one of us now—and I want to send him back to you. Even if I get nothing in return, he's more trouble than he's worth. A goodwill gesture, though, part of your reparations, might lead you to stick Epiphany Ekanobi and Paul Dalton on a plane to Europe. That'll also mean you'll have to enforce your own laws over in California a bit more rigorously than you are at the moment. Throw in the Anarchy kid, too, while you're at it. That and stopping trying to kill me and my friends, we can call it quits."

Mackensie cleared his throat. "You are in possession of the gold codes?"

"Yeah. It's not like you weren't warned. Repeatedly. Everyone else in the room had worked it out. But not you."

"And what do you intend to do next?"

“I gave you three options: killing billions, losing your bank balances, or holding your nerve and doing precisely nothing. There were two right answers, but no, you went ahead and picked the other one. You’d have destroyed the world, you mad fuck.” Petrovitch snorted. “No, you haven’t launched, and it’s not something I would ever do. So there’s no real harm done. No one’s died in a global nuclear holocaust. We can all breathe out again and promise to do better next time. Except for you. Something tells me, even though they changed the constitution to allow you to stand for more than two terms, even though each time you’ve been up for election your majority has grown and your approval rating just keeps getting better —you’re not going to make it out of the Situation Room still being president.”

Petrovitch kept walking, and turned his good eye to the skyline, where smoke and dust hung in a low pall. There was masonry to navigate, and cracks in the road. Pools of water and piles of glass.

“You showed everyone who you really are today, Mackensie. Not the great president, the architect of Reconstruction and protector of the American people. It turns out that you’re really an insane old man with an Armageddon fetish who’d rather nuke the planet than admit you were wrong—and I’ve got it all on file. If you think these streets look bad, this city: it can be rebuilt, which is more than can be said for your reputation. I had a very illuminating chat with Paul Dalton a couple of days ago, who told me of Reconstruction’s dark heart; that if you looked like you were out of step with the project, different in some way, maybe even just weak, it would turn on you and tear you apart without hesitation or mercy. That’s what’s going to happen to you, and I’m going to enjoy watching it played out. Look at the faces around you. Look at them closely. They’re your executioners, not me. Goodbye Mackensie.”

36

There was more to do, but Petrovitch was content to let others do it. Once he'd matched jobs to people, he saw no reason to fret about their competence. He'd done enough for one day—enough, it felt, for a lifetime—and it was true what he'd told Mackensie; he was tired.

He'd talked to presidents and prime ministers, he'd talked to ambassadors and representatives. He'd had a very poignant conversation with the Secretary General of the United Nations, who inexplicably reminded him of his mother, and he'd choked up completely.

His mother: now that was a situation he was probably going to have to deal with at some point. Just not yet.

A mere cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church didn't really rank at all compared with the rest of the great and the good. Still, there he was, sitting on the steps of a bizarre Italianate building that had somehow squeezed itself between a town house and a pizza restaurant, sadly closed for the duration.

Carillo had found an unbroken bottle of bourbon in the wreckage of the Mount Street church and had brought it out to share. He lowered himself onto the cold marble and arranged two glasses on the step next to him.

Petrovitch picked up the bottle by its neck and read the label.

"Proof that there's at least something American you'll appreciate," said the cardinal.

"I'm not that knee-jerk." Petrovitch passed the bottle back, and the cardinal cracked the seal. "Am I?"

"I think that's a whole different conversation to the one I planned on having." Carillo bent low over the glasses, pouring carefully so he didn't spill a drop. "If this was any stronger, I wouldn't be able to carry it on commercial flights. As it is, it shouldn't dissolve your guts if you take it in moderation."

"And all this on an empty stomach. You'd think being a multi-billionaire and leader of what's left of one of the world's great cities would mean lunch at some point."

Carillo passed Petrovitch his drink and looked out from under the porch at the darkening sky. "Can't help you there. I brought the booze."

"At least I'm a cheap date." Corn whiskey wasn't his usual, but he'd make the exception, just this once. He twisted his wrist and emptied the contents of the glass into his mouth. He held the liquid there for a moment, then swallowed.

He let out a puff of air, and screwed up his remaining eye.

"Stagg's a decent drop. The bottle's yours to keep, by way of an apology." Carillo sipped his bourbon and drew his knees up against the cold. "You'll be getting a letter from the Pope at some point, too."

"Yeah, well. You didn't know. And it's only your God that's supposed to be omniscient, not his followers." Petrovitch hefted the bottle again, and worked the stopper free. He poured himself another two fingers and stared at the light through the dark oak whiskey. "This is self-medication. I'm due in surgery."

"The eye?"

Petrovitch touched his pirate's eyepatch: Lucy's idea. "I don't even need a local for that, just plug and play. It's the arm. It bled inside, and it's… easier if they amputate."

"I'm sorry to hear that. You going organic?"

"Probably not. My flight from this meat-sack continues, *Tetsuo*-stylee."

"What does Madeleine say about that?"

"I'm paraphrasing, but it was something like 'at least the next time someone tries to break your arm, you can break theirs right back'." Petrovitch drank half the bourbon in his glass. "She understands me. I don't know if that's good or scary."

"She is your wife."

"Yeah. We're still just a couple of kids, though. We have no role models: both our fathers are dead, her mother was an alcoholic and, when she sobered up, she became an Outie and tried to kill Maddy. I abandoned my family back in St. Petersburg. I don't even know what marriage is supposed to look like, let alone the rest of it."

Carillo sipped and contemplated. "So why did you get married?"

"Apparently it was the only way we could get to bang each other's brains out without incurring God's wrath."

After they'd both stopped laughing, Petrovitch felt he should explain.

"The whole living together, being with each other thing. I didn't need a piece of paper for that. She did: she has this irrational belief that it means something extra. So that's why I agreed." He drank more, poured more. "I don't want to be with anybody else. She's…"

"What?" said Carillo after a suitable wait.

"Did I ever tell you about how fantastic her breasts are? They're just breathtaking, amazing, a work of art from a Renaissance master. They're the sort of breasts Leonardo would have drawn." He looked sideways at the cardinal. "There is a point to this."

"I was wondering."

"When she takes her top off, I'm like a kid in a sweet shop. I know it's a function of biochemistry, my age and my complete lack of experience in these things, and mostly I'm just pathetically grateful

she wants to be with me. But it wasn't her breasts that I missed while we weren't together. It was her."

"What you're saying is that you love her." Carillo made a half-smile. "Which is right and proper. I know a lot of my colleagues don't approve, but I do."

"You've talked about me and Maddy?"

"At a surprisingly high level. She is, as I'm sure you realize, an extraordinary young woman. A great loss to the Order, and some have agitated this past year for your marriage to be annulled."

Petrovitch's fingers tightened around his glass. "So Father John didn't act on his own."

"So it would seem. You've already caused two revolutions today, why not a third?" Carillo hunched over further. "Maybe I will have some more of Kentucky's finest."

Petrovitch slid the bottle across the gap between them. "Strange days for both of us, then. I take it you're not going to name names."

"Having seen what you do to people who cross you, no. There'll be an inquiry, held *in curia,* and the results will not be divulged. I'm sure you can create some pattern-recognition software that'll track appointments and retirements, but I'd rather you didn't." Carillo held the bourbon bottle up and frowned at the amount already missing. Then he shrugged and dealt himself another shot. "We might move slowly, but we are very thorough."

"Like the Americans."

"You keep forgetting I am one."

"You keep having to remember you are one. I'd hardly call what's happening over there a revolution, though. It's still Reconstruction to the core."

"Mackensie went within the hour, and you got everything you wanted. That's a victory, of sorts."

"The cost of it. *Chyort,* we lost so much to get so…"

"Little? I could list your achievements, but that won't make you feel better."

"I can't unsee: with my set-up, I can play it again with perfect clarity any time I want. And I can't undo: I've killed people today, and they're not coming back."

"They so rarely do," murmured Carillo. "Shall we get this over with, then? Assuming you still want to go through with it."

"Yeah. I've thought about it, and what with me being such a *yebani* genius I have to be right at least some of the time." Petrovitch saw off the last of his drink and pulled his arm back ready to throw.

The cardinal caught his wrist and retrieved the glass. "Enough broken things for one day." He set the glass down with his own, and got up stiffly. The cold had seeped into his bones and he hadn't taken

as much whiskey as Petrovitch.

He led the way up the steps to the tall wooden doors. He knocked, rapping with his knuckles: the door opened a crack, then further. Sister Marie, dressed in her full habit, stood aside. When they were between the outer doors and the inner ones, she stood close to Petrovitch and looked him up and down.

"Weapons, please," she said.

"What makes you think I have any?"

"If you don't, I think you ought."

"This is the Freezone, not the wild west." Petrovitch raised his arm over his head anyway. "Feel free to pat me down, sister. You won't find… *huy,* you know what? I'm going to cut the cheap innuendo and let you get on with your job."

"Thank you."

If he thought she was going to wave him through, he was mistaken. She was thorough in her way, just like the men she protected. When she was done, she faced him, blinking.

"You can have my gun on the way out if you want," she offered.

"That's very kind. But I'm being picked up, and they'll have all the guns I need." Petrovitch put his arm down, and started forward, but Sister Marie put her hand out and blocked him.

"A couple of ground rules, *mon ami.* Do not touch him, at all, ever. Even if I think you're going to shake his hand, I'm stepping in. Second: you're here against my advice and I'm yet to be convinced this is a good idea. If this looks like it's taking a wrong turn, or even if it's not going anywhere, I'll call a halt to it. *Oui?*"

Petrovitch nodded. "I'm fresh out of anger, Sister."

"I don't believe you. You make anger like you make electricity: out of nothing." But she pushed through the second set of doors and held them open to make sure they didn't close on him.

It was so bright inside: so many lights, so much white and gold. The ivory marble columns supported an achingly high ceiling, and the nave was designed in a way that drew the eye irresistibly toward the baroque canopied altar.

"*Yobany stos.*" Petrovitch turned around and caught sight of the curve of the organ pipes and the choir gallery. "You lot are so full of contradictions, it's a wonder you don't explode every morning. How could anyone justify this level of luxury when…"

"It was built in an age when such things were done to glorify God." Carillo stood beside him and looked at the statues in their niches, at the paintings in their distant splendor. "I'm just a simple Jesuit priest. I neither seek nor avoid places like this: it is what it is and, ultimately, it's just a building."

Petrovitch spotted a single lit candle off to one side, placed in a

banked metal holder that held a century of melted wax. Kneeling before the candle, his face so close to the flame that his breath made the light flicker, was Father John Slater.

Behind him was another Joan, and there was a third waiting in the shadows. Perhaps they really did think Petrovitch was going to try and kill him. They still might be right.

Sister Marie dogged his footsteps all the way up the aisle, and stood with her back to one of the pillars, her hand resting on her holster.

In front of the candle holder was a low bench on which to kneel. Father John took up most of it and seemed so intent on staring unblinking at the yellow flame that he appeared oblivious to the movement behind him.

Petrovitch slid into the front pew and eased himself along until he was in the priest's peripheral vision. "I understand you've got something you want to say to me."

He seemed to have survived the last two days unscathed. He even looked well-fed. "Yes," said Father John without turning away from the candle. "That was the message."

"I find myself a suddenly busy man. Why don't you get on with it, and I can go and, I don't know, get my arm chopped off."

"If you wish." The priest finally moved his head, and looked at Petrovitch with his pin-prick-pupilled eyes. "I'd do it all again tomorrow, if I thought this time it would work."

The three Joans had their guns out and pointed at Petrovitch in less time than it took to say "hail Mary." For his part, all he did was snort.

"Yeah. They say repentance is good for the soul. At least, I think that's what they say: I never really paid much attention to that sort of thing. Winning, now that's good for the soul. Losing, and losing badly? Not so great. And you seem to be the biggest loser of all. Unless you're going to kill yourself like Sonja did, then you get to live knowing you fucked up completely. Everything you were aiming for, you missed."

"I made you suffer. Not as much as I wanted, but you suffered all the same."

"What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger. Never thought I'd get to quote Nietzsche in a church, but here we are. That must make me pretty much invincible at the moment, considering what I've been through. How about you, priest? Not that you'll be that for much longer. I understand the Holy Inquisition would like a chat."

"Whatever they do to me, it'll have been worth it."

Petrovitch pursed his lips. "Yeah. By the way, thanks."

"For what?"

"It's like this," said Petrovitch, leaning forward. "I wouldn't have

half of what I have now if it hadn't been for your inept meddling. To be fair, you were almost as much a pawn in Sonja's plot as I was, which means you get downgraded from criminal mastermind to unwitting accomplice, but those are the breaks."

Holding up his little finger, he continued. "I get Pif back. Never would have happened otherwise. And I get a bonus Dalton thrown in—he loses his wife and children and everything he knows, but escapes from the lynch mob with his life." He raised another finger. "Anarchy. The kid who wrote that? I egged him on. Now he's on the same flight as the other two. Three: Michael. I would have got him out anyway. But now he's out and he's free. That's a real gift you've given him. He has so much to tell me: I can feel him just at the back of my head, waiting for the right moment to show me the wonders of the universe, if only I can understand them."

"Which I doubt," said Father John.

"You don't get to speak," said Petrovitch quietly, to the accompaniment of an automatic's slide being dragged back. He looked up, and he was still the target of three handguns. "Four. I have a future I can only dream of. Suddenly everything is much clearer, much more obvious. I know what I have to do now, and again it's partly down to you. And five: I get the girl. I get Maddy and I get everything else with her. You made her choose between your world and mine. She chose me. She'll keep choosing me. When we were on our own, underground, in the dark and the damp, and a nuclear bomb about to go off in the next room, she made me choose too. I chose her. I'll keep on choosing her, too, till the end of time."

He got up slowly, so as not to scare the Joans.

"You and your cabal are history. I can trust Carillo to make sure of that. And next time—if there is a next time, which I'm guessing there won't be—don't go in with someone so paranoid that she doesn't even tell her CIA masters her plan. It really won't work."

Petrovitch edged back along the pew to the side aisle.

"Is that it?" said Father John, rising. "Is that it?"

"Yeah," replied Petrovitch, "I'm done. What did you think I was going to do? Lunge for your throat and force Sister Marie to kill me? You are so *yebani* transparent. And as I walk away, you're going to try and wrestle one of the Joans' guns from them. Good luck with that. You're going to need it."

He turned his back to the sounds of a brief but intense scuffle and went to join Carillo at the back of the church.

The cardinal looked rueful. "You're right. I don't know everything."

"Meh," said Petrovitch. "My lift's outside. I'd better go."

"You know where to find me if you ever need any relationship

advice."

"From a celibate priest? Even if you do have a decent taste in liquor, I don't think so."

"Like I said, I've been around the block a few times, and I want you to do well." Carillo proffered his hand. "Look after yourself."

Petrovitch had no reservations in shaking it. "Here comes the future."

"We're all traveling into it, one second at a time."

Petrovitch pushed at the doors with his back, and started to place a call to his tame Bavarian dome-builders.

"I think you'll find," he said, "that some of us are going much faster than that."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Long-term success in any artistic career—painting, writing, composing, whatever—seems to rest on talent, luck, and perseverance: pick any two. I've certainly persevered, but I've also been lucky. (The folk band Show of Hands make the point that the harder you practice, the luckier you become, adding that it helps if you can play an instrument. And they're right.)

Having an agent does help, though, which is why there's an oft-repeated complaint from authors that it's harder to get an agent than it is to get a publishing deal. I met mine through another of those unlikely chain of events that happened simply because I'd been hanging around long enough.

I could write all sorts of things here, but I'll save both our blushes and simply say: this book is dedicated to Ant.

Meet the Author

Dr. Simon Morden is a bona fide rocket scientist, having degrees in geology and planetary geophysics. He was born in Gateshead, England and now resides in Worthing, England. Find out more about Simon Morden at www.simonmorden.com.

interview

Doctor Morden, I presume?

Guilty as charged. I got my PhD in planetary geophysics at the tender age of 24—unfortunately I'd managed to specialize myself into a corner and when the grant money ran out, I had to take on a series of bizarre jobs beloved of authors for their biographies. Then I became a full-time househusband looking after my kids. I now teach part-time at a local primary school, where I'm responsible for building hovercraft, airplanes, bomb shelters and gravity cars. There might be some blowing stuff up, too.

So you became a science fiction writer because you're a scientist?

It's almost the other way around: reading SF lead me to become a scientist. I was a horribly precocious child who started on adult books at a young age—I was just let loose in the library and told to get on with it, which led me to read some gloriously age-inappropriate novels. But one of the first I picked up was a James White Sector General story: that put me on the right path for the next thirty years or so. I devoured Clarke and Azimov, read every Niven and Bradbury story I could lay my hands on. That sort of thing is like dynamite to a kid's brain.

I don't think it occurred to me that I could be a writer until quite late on: seventeen or so. Yes, I made up stuff—a very rich interior life, as the psychologists would say—and it was all genre, but it was more directed toward role playing games. I discovered Dungeons and Dragons through my interest in wargaming, and I was hooked instantly: I could be in stories like the ones I read. I started designing my own scenarios; adding in history, geography, ecology, and ending up with some serious world building. But that's Morden's First Law of writing: nothing is ever wasted.

I finished my first novel at the same time as my thesis—fantasy, because it was different to my studies, and what I was used to GMing—fortunately the thesis was more impressive. That novel is in a drawer slowly turning into coal, but I had caught the bug: I wrote another book, SF this time (also unpublished and unpublishable), and just kept on going. I finally sold a short story in 1998, eight years after that first novel. I don't know whether you'd call it persistence or sheer bloody-mindedness. But it was a good apprenticeship, all the same.

There's a very rich back-story to Equations of Life.

Yes. Yes, there is, and it has a story all of its own to go with it.

Some of this is in the dedication, but here's the rest of it.

Back when I was a new writer and I was looking for markets for my short stories, the editor I was working with at the time (and eventually, the publisher didn't take the novel) noted that I lived quite close by another writer who'd just pitched a charity anthology to him, and that I ought to make contact. That story was "Bell, Book and Candle" and was one of my first "pro" sales. It was also the first story I'd written set in the London Metrozone after Armageddon.

I kept on coming back to that world, and I realized I'd almost written enough stories to make a collection—something I successfully pitched to Brian Hopkins at Lone Wolf Publications. Thy Kingdom Come—twenty stories in all—was published in 2002. That was where Petrovitch, Harry Chain, Madeleine and the Sorensons all first appeared. I'd been kicking the idea for a novel set in the aftermath of Armageddon around for years, and I'd had repeated stabs at the idea before, but nothing that anyone would publish.

Then I wrote Equations of Life, and everything that was missing before suddenly turned up. Theories of Flight came without a break, and Degrees of Freedom charged relentlessly behind. By this time, I'd sold the trilogy to Orbit and had a deadline—and I put in some seriously stupid hours getting it finished: books two and three in little more than a year.

There are some continuity issues between Equations of Life and Thy Kingdom Come, and I have thought about going back and retconning the short stories so they fit. I still might. If you're interested, all the stories in Thy Kingdom Come are free to read or download from my website.

It's not a particularly happy view of the future, is it?

Or the past—I have the timelines splitting in 2000. But it's difficult to answer this question without looking back at to what I thought the future was going to be when I was a kid. I grew up, almost literally, in the shadow of the nuclear holocaust. My house was stuck between Aldermaston, where they built atomic bombs, and RAF Burghfield, where they armed them. Greenham Common was just down the road. If war had broken out, my atoms would have been some of the first in the stratosphere.

But it didn't happen. The Berlin Wall fell. The Soviet Union collapsed. The EU have integrated former communist countries into a partnership based on trade and cooperation, not fear and armaments. I live in a future that my parents would never have dreamed of forty years ago.

I'm a father myself now: what makes me hopeful is that people of goodwill, of all colors, creeds and political persuasions, want to work

together to make the future viable for all of us, and that's certainly what I'm raising my own kids to be part of. What makes me fearful is that it might not be enough.

Now's your chance to say something nice about Americans.

Sorry about that. But it's not like other countries have had it easy, either. Britain has ceased to exist as a political entity, Ireland is entirely depopulated, Russia is a barely-functioning kleptocracy, the European Union couldn't come to a joint decision on anything more complicated than which biscuits to serve at meetings and Japan has sunk beneath the waves. The U.S.A. voting a highly conservative, isolationist, quasi-religious party into power is mild in comparison.

I have been to the U.S., and everyone was uniformly lovely to me, even immigration and customs officials. The beer, on the other hand, was pretty dreadful.

You don't shy away from religious characters or using theology in your plots—which is not the norm for SF books.

Which is a fancy way of asking, why the god-bothering? Faith is something that seems to be hard-wired into many people—like music or storytelling. Faith, in whatever form it comes in, can inform and direct someone's choices, show in their characters, lead them to points of crisis and moments of decision. It doesn't have to be an individual's religious faith: it can be a child believing their parents love them, or a society believing in scientific progress.

It's often an important part of people's lives, along with class, wealth, nationality, race, sexuality, and politics. I'd find it strange to have smart characters who didn't consider the big questions that science, philosophy and religion try to answer, and stranger still that they wouldn't try and behave differently because of their beliefs.

That doesn't mean that their behavior is predictable, consistent or compatible with the general good, though. Much like real life.

You're on record as saying that reading science fiction is a virtue.

It is. For example, a reader is simply smarter for having picked up this book. Not just because I wrote it, but because it's a science fiction book. One of the biggest questions anyone ever asks themselves is 'what if?' Science fiction is all about 'what ifs,' and SF stories are deliberately told to explore the possibility of, whatever—time travel, genetic engineering, computers in people's heads, teleportation, what happens when the oil runs out, what do we do if we're contacted by aliens.

It doesn't just explore though, it works through the scenarios—it

trains you to think differently, to dream differently. Ray Bradbury, one of my all-time favorite authors said: ‘People ask me to predict the future, when all I want to do is prevent it.’ I’m certain that if more politicians read science fiction, we wouldn’t be in half the messes we’re in now, because they would have foreseen the problems beforehand.

Ray Bradbury went straight on to say: ‘Better yet, build it.’ Science fiction inspired me to become a scientist: he, and the other great writers I read all those years ago helped to make one scruffy, awkward English kid think about all his possible futures, and made him want to live in the good ones. We’re not there yet: we may never arrive at our destination.

But the journey? Oh yes…

introducing

If you enjoyed

THE PETROVITCH TRILOGY,

look out for

THE CURVE OF THE EARTH

by Simon Morden

WELCOME TO THE METROZONE. Post-apocalyptic London, full of street gangs and homeless refugees. A dangerous city needs an equally dangerous savior. Step forward Samuil Petrovitch, a genius with extensive cybernetic replacements, a built-in AI with godlike capabilities, and a full armory of Russian swear words. He's dragged the city back from the brink more than once—and made a few enemies on the way. So when his adopted daughter, Lucy, goes missing in Alaska, he has some clue who's responsible and why. It never occurs to him that guessing wrong could tip the delicate balance of nuclear-armed nations. This time it's not just a city that needs saving: it's the whole world.

Chapter 1

Petrovitch wanted to be alone, to worry and to brood, but he was part of the Freezone collective and that meant never having to be alone again. Company was built in, through the links they wore. Except for him. He didn't wear a link: he was so connected that, at times, it felt like it wore him.

So he'd taken himself off so he could pretend– not far, just to the top of the hill which overlooked the collection of different-sized domes below. The narrow strip of land before the sea looked like a collection of luminous pearls cradled in the darkness of a winter night.

He'd reached the summit, as determined by at least four satellites spinning overhead, and sat down on the wet, flowing grass to wait. He faced the ocean and felt the first tug of an Atlantic gale stiffen the cloak he'd thrown around him.

[Sasha?]

"*Yobany stos*." He'd been there for what? A minute? Less. "When there's news, *vrubatsa*? Otherwise *past' zabej*."

He hunched over and stared at the horizon. The last vestiges of twilight were fading into the south-west, but the moon was almost full behind the racing clouds. Enough light for him to see by, at least, even if the climb up would have been crazy for anyone else.

Somewhere over there, over the curve of the Earth, was his daughter, his Lucy, and she had been out of contact for fifty-eight hours and forty-five minutes.

These things happened. Once in a while, the link technology they all carried failed. It meant a break in what kept each individual bound together with the rest of the collective, and a quick trip to the stores for a replacement.

White plastic pressed against bare flesh. A connection restored, and the collective was complete once more.

Lucy was beyond the reach of any Freezone storeroom. She was on the other side of the world, and even he couldn't just pop over and present her with another link. There were difficulties and complications, not entirely of his own making.

The clock in the corner of his vision ticked on, counting the seconds. Relying on other people still didn't sit easily with him, though he'd had a decade to get used to the idea. Relying on the Americans and their ultra-conservative, hyper-patriotic, quasi-fascistic, crypto-theocratic Reconstructionist government?

His heart spun faster just thinking about it. They had a joint past, one that barely rose above mutual loathing, and he was certain there was something they weren't telling him. There'd been◦– a what? At this distance it was difficult to tell. The Freezone had only just started the laborious process of gathering the raw data and trying to fashion meaning from it.

He pulled his cloak tighter around him, not for warmth but for comfort.

[Sasha?]

There was a figure standing next to him, dark-clothed, white-faced. It hadn't been there a moment before, and it wasn't really there now. It stared west with the same troubled hope that Petrovitch had.

[There's,] and the voice hesitated. It hardly ever hesitated. The only times it ever hesitated were when it was dealing with meat-stuff. Important meat-stuff.

"What?"

[There's been a development.]

"Tell me."

[There is no sign of Lucy.]

“Yeah. That figures.” Petrovitch clenched his jaw and bared his teeth. “Where the *huy* is she?”

[The search-and-rescue team’s initial findings do not indicate the actions of any outside agency.]

“They wouldn’t, would they? I knew it. I knew it was a mistake to let her go. I should have—”

[Forbidden it?] said Michael, looking down on Petrovitch. [She is twenty-four years old and an autonomous citizen of the Freezone.]

“She’s still my responsibility.”

[Not by law or custom. Need I remind you what you were doing when you were twenty-four? Or when you were eighteen?]

Petrovitch fumed. “It’s not the same.”

[Sasha, we will find her.]

“Of course we will. Tell me what they’re saying.”

[That at eleven fifteen local time, a search-and-rescue team comprising USAF, Alaskan police and University of Alaska personnel, flying out of Eielson Air Force Base, conducted a preliminary search of the University of Alaska Fairbanks North Slope research station. The single known occupant of that research station, Dr Lucy Petrovitch, was not located despite a thorough search of all the solid structures. There was nothing to indicate that she had either left the station on an expedition, or been forced to leave against her will. A search of the immediate area has commenced, though it will be necessarily limited in scope.]

“What the *huy* does that mean?”

[It means they have four hours of daylight in any twenty-four-hour period, and the air force transport must return to base. An overland expedition is being arranged. They estimate it will arrive in a week,] and Michael paused again. [Which seems unnecessarily delayed. I will attempt to ascertain a reason for this.]

Petrovitch felt impotent rage rise like a spring tide. His skin pricked with sweat.

[Talk to me, Sasha,] said Michael. [Tell me what you’re thinking.]

Lucy’s link was standard Freezone issue. Satellite enabled, always on, not just reliable, but dependable: powered by the heat from her body.

“They don’t go wrong. They just don’t.” He looked up at Michael’s avatar, framed against the silver-lined clouds. “She took a spare. I made her, because I’m a good father. And neither of them are working.”

To prove the point, he pinged her machine◦– both of them. He got nothing, and there was so rarely nothing.

“Something’s happened. I want to know what. I want to know now.”

[How many of our protocols are we going to break this time?] asked Michael. “As a point of reference? More than the Baku incident?”

[More than Beirut. We’re going to break them all if we have to. Assemble an ad-hoc. They can decide.]

Michael polled the Freezone collective and selected five names with the required expertise and wisdom. There was no need to wait for them to assemble, exchange pleasantries, enquire about the kids; that wasn’t what an ad-hoc was about. He’d been in enough to know the score.

There were preliminaries, though: for the record.

[Welcome, Freezone ad-hoc committee number four thousand seven hundred and ninety-two, convened on February fifth, twenty thirty-four, at twenty forty-eight Universal Time to discuss the preliminary response of the Freezone to the disappearance of Lucy Petrovitch. Please state your names.]

The five people could be anywhere on the planet. They could be in the mother dome in Cork, or planting electric trees in the Sahara. It didn’t matter.

“Mohammed al-Ghazi.”

“Stephan Moltzman.”

“Jessica Levantine.”

“Gracious Mendelane.”

“Tabletop.”

Petrovitch blinked. “Hey,” he said.

“Hey, Sam.”

She shouldn’t have been on the ad-hoc. Though she was one of the few North Americans they had, it was a veritable United Nations as it was. The point being, it was personal for her. She was Lucy’s big sister in all but name. She wasn’t going to even pretend to be impartial.

He used a backchannel to talk to Michael. “Are you sure about this?”

[You don’t get to question the make-up of the ad-hoc, Sasha. That’s one protocol you don’t get to break.]

That was him told.

Addressing the committee, Michael gave them bald facts: shortly after midnight, three days ago, Lucy Petrovitch lost contact with the Freezone. That she had been conducting research on Alaska’s frozen, dark North Slope was a complicating factor, but not the primary concern.

The point was, she’d vanished. And no one seemed to be in any particular rush to find her.

[We need to decide what assets we dedicate to the search, and

how they are best deployed.]

Human minds worked differently to Michael's. There was a long gap before anyone spoke.

"I would say, we do everything, despite the Americans," said Mendelane, "but it cannot be denied that we require◦– at the very least◦– the co-operation of the relevant authorities. We must tread carefully."

"She is one of us," said al-Ghazi. Where he was, he could see the same sky as Petrovitch, the same Moon illuminating the tops of the electric trees as they cooled and clicked in the Saharan night. "There is no question of us doing nothing. Would they permit Freezone personnel in Alaska? Or our proxies?"

[I will pass on a request to the US State Department,] said Michael. [You must decide whether we ask, or whether we insist. And if we insist, how forcefully we put our demands.]

"I would be cautious," said Mendelane.

"I wouldn't," said Tabletop. "I'd threaten them with everything we can, and if that's not enough, we make shit up until they give in. Look, Lucy's not the sort of kid◦– not the sort of woman◦– to go wandering into the night in her slippers and dressing gown, especially when that night lasts for twenty-plus hours and it's fifteen below. If they're not interested in looking for her, we'll do it instead. We could have a team on the ground by tomorrow morning."

"The university said it would take them a week," said Moltzman. Petrovitch didn't know him personally, just his reputation score, which was a respectable eighty-something. "Why would they say that if, firstly, a military search-and-rescue could be deployed in hours, and secondly, they know we could do it faster, with most of our people half a world away?"

[That is a good question,] noted Michael, and Moltzman's pregnant rep birthed another point. [I can suggest some possible answers, but assigning probabilities to them will take time if I am to be accurate.]

"It's because she's a Petrovitch," said Tabletop. "This whole thing was a set-up from start to finish: the original invitation, which she should have refused, the fact that she was alone, in winter, in the dark, in an isolated location. I said she shouldn't go."

[An ad-hoc said she should accept.]

"They were wrong!"

[Samuil Petrovitch was on that ad-hoc,] Michael reminded her, reminded them all. [He agreed with the decision made then.]

"That's come back to bite him on the arse, hasn't it?" She lapsed into sullen silence, and the dead air that followed stretched uncomfortably.

There was another protocol surrounding the ad-hocs, that the petitioner wasn't supposed to speak on their own initiative: they could answer questions, clarify positions, discuss motivations. But not be an advocate, and certainly not grandstand. The committee members weren't a jury, and an ad-hoc wasn't a court.

Petrovitch held his nerve, and his tongue.

[It may have been that the ad-hoc was not in possession of all necessary information, although I did my best at the time.] Having slapped him down once, Michael was now taking responsibility for Petrovitch's piss-poor judgement. [That also may be the case here: however, this is the way we decided we would conduct our decision-making, and if you do not come to a consensus, I will dismiss you and convene another ad-hoc.]

"No," said al-Ghazi quickly. "We will decide." He had no way of knowing if he was in the first ad-hoc or the tenth: the Berber tribesman had embraced the nature of the Freezone's ad-hocracy with all the fervour of a convert, and he'd been called on to play his part.

[We have not heard from one of the committee. If you please, Mrs Levantine.]

"Well now," she said, and Petrovitch imagined her leaning back in her chair, knitting needles maintaining a steady click-clack rhythm. She didn't knit out of utility, but out of respect for the craft. "Lucy's the age of my eldest granddaughter, and I know she hasn't got her birth mother or father to worry about her, but she has Sam and Madeleine, and all of us instead. She never struck me as a silly girl: a little too serious for her own good, if you ask me, so I agree with Tabletop. She wouldn't walk out of a safe place for any reason except a very good reason. So either someone took her, or she was persuaded◦– by someone else or her own mind."

"You think she is still alive," said Mendelane, "despite what an extended break in linking usually means?"

"Oh, for certain. No one would take the trouble of going all that way just to, you know, hurt her."

"Will whoever has her look after her? Until we find her?"

"Well now," she said again. "We can hope, can't we?"

Moltzman cleared his throat. "So, what do we need to do? Demand in the strongest possible terms that the authorities treat her disappearance as a crime, not as accidental or negligent. That they put all reasonable effort into finding her…"

"Strike 'reasonable'," said Tabletop. "They need to prove to us they're doing everything they can. Missing persons is an FBI thing: we want nothing less than someone on the ground, up on the North Slope, directing local assets."

"One of us or one of them?" asked Moltzman.

“Both,” said Tabletop emphatically. “We watch over their shoulder so we know it’s being done right.”

[Does everyone agree to this course of action?] Michael tabulated the votes, and reported back the result. [The committee is unanimous. The question remains, who do we send?]

“I will go,” offered al-Ghazi. “I would be honoured to accept the duty.”

Honoured he might be, but the Americans would eat him alive. Petrovitch jumped in, almost without thinking. That was a lie: he’d done nothing but think since Lucy had gone offline. When the moment presented itself, he was ready.

“No. That’s my job,” he said.

Tabletop was instantly furious. “Sam: they’ve got one Petrovitch already. We’re not giving them another.”

“Who else, then? You?”

“You know I can’t… anybody. Anyone else but you.”

“Fine. Name someone better equipped to survive Reconstruction America. Someone who’ll get Lucy, and bring her home.”

“This isn’t meant to happen, Sam. You’re not supposed to get involved again.”

“Yeah, well. I am involved.” A muscle in Petrovitch’s face twitched, and he started to notice the cold and the wind again. “I suppose I’d better tell Maddy.”

It was just him and Michael again, on the hillside, with the domes below and the sky above.

[Good luck with that,] said Michael.

“Yeah.” Petrovitch scrubbed at his face and thought about getting up. “Probably best done in person. Difficult to land a punch over a link.”

Michael’s avatar patted him on the shoulder. Petrovitch could feel the reassuring pressure, despite it all happening somewhere on a virtual interface buried deep in his brain.

“You’d better fuck off now. Certain you’ve got better things to do than nursemaid me.”

[You know where I am…] The avatar vanished, and Petrovitch levered himself up.

“You’re everywhere,” he said, and started back to the sea.

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